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Polish Peasants into Americans: U.S. Citizenship and Americanization among Polish Immigrants in the Inter-War Era

Abstract: Despite the pessimistic assessment of Thomas and Znaniecki, Polish immigrants to the United States built a stable and cohesive social and institutional community in the interwar years. The complex network of self organization and a high rate of naturalization as U.S. citizens reflected the strong motivation and ability of Polish Americans to fit into working class America during the 1920s and 30s.

Keywords: assimilation, Polish Americans, Polish immigrants (1918–45), naturalization, citizenship

The Polish peasants who made their appearance in William I. Thomas' and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* between 1918 and 1920, were a community buffeted by social and economic change, and characterized by the disintegration of traditional values and beliefs. As the old world of the peasant village receded in importance at the turn of the twentieth century, not much appeared to be taking the place of the traditional universe of beliefs, no new order was about to emerge. Attempts to re-construct traditional community in the New World seemed stunted and inadequate.

Social historians and social scientists have commented for decades that *The Polish Peasant* did not make for good social history, since the fine textures and differences of Polish emigration over time were not given centre stage in the study. As Eli Zaretzky (1984) observed, the authors of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* were interested in constructing a comprehensive social and psychological model of social disintegration that, in their opinion, inevitably accompanied the declining importance of rural society from which immigrants came. The history of Polish rural to urban migration or the building of new forms of civic self organization in industrial America, were of less interest to the authors, at least as it appears in these volumes (Zaretzky 1984).[1]

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[1] *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* was originally conceived as a nineteen volume series with a significant component on immigrant society. Znaniecki himself was a specialist on Polish emigration. Prior to coming to join Thomas in Chicago, he had worked for the Polish "Society for the Protection of Emigrants," and edited its journal (Lopata 1996).

The predictive power of Thomas' and Znaniecki's model also turned out to be limited. As we know now, Polish America grew into a thriving and cohesive community in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, even though the authors did not acknowledge the existence of a growing body of scholarship on Polish migration and Poles in the United States at the time, within a few years of the publication of *The Polish Peasant*, the ethnographic and historical literature on Polish America had grown quite a bit (Kruszka 1993). In a way, Thomas and Znaniecki thus provided the beginning of a take off-phase in Polish American history. This paper cannot recount the historiography of *Polonia* in the twentieth century. Other authors have done this in some depth (Saveth 1948, Conzen 1996). Instead, it proposes to widen the parameters of the historical study of Polish America by discussing a relatively little researched area: the civic incorporation of Polish immigrants and their children in the United States in the decades between World War I and World War II.

In a sense, the following pages will therefore provide a chronological and thematic follow-up chapter to Thomas' and Znaniecki's assessment of Polish American community life. While there are many histories of *Polonia* written in the last fifty years, they usually describe Polish immigrant communities as preoccupied with internal issues: organizing the faithful, supporting the homeland and furthering the community's cohesion through cultural transmission of language and religion. In more recent scholarship, Polish-Americans and their children also show up as consumers, working class activists, promoters of culture and stalwarts of American Catholicism in general during the inter-war years (Bukowczyk 1987, Bodnar et al. 1982, Greene 1975, Pacyga 1991, Cohen 1990, Walaszek 1989, Sanders and Morawska 1975). Still missing from the history of *Polonia* is an understanding and analysis of Polish Americans' ideas about America and American citizenship in the 1920s and 1930s. In these decades, the communities of Polish immigrants and their children neither disintegrated, nor did they keep distant from the civic nationalism of the American public sphere. Instead, Polish-Americans during the inter-war period became a visible and engaged group of ethnic Americans who could be quite articulate about their place in the United States, not just inside but outside *Polonia* as well.

I will use two largely untapped sources for a close-up analysis of Polish integration and views of the United States during the 1920s and 30s: a collection of oral histories of Polish immigrants collected by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s and a collection of interviews and case histories of Polish immigrants collected by the Chicago sociologist Sophonsiba Breckinridge (1931). Breckinridge used her interviews for a study, published in 1931 under the title *Marriage and the Civic Right of Women*, which concerned the implementation of the Cable Act of 1922. The Act provided for independent citizenship (and naturalization) for women immigrants separate from their husbands. Beginning in 1922, adult female immigrants who wanted to become U.S. citizens had to file the required papers and pass an English and civics test on their own. This law (pursued with some energy by the suffrage movement and many Progressives) resulted in a greatly diminished number of women becoming U.S. citizens in the first decade or so after its implementation (Bredbenner 1998). Breckinridge, a supporter of the law, tried to find out how working class immigrant

women in Chicago dealt with the Cable Act. Her study is mostly empirical. She and her assistants culled about 170 names from the records of the Chicago naturalization courts for 1927 and succeeded in presenting about 140 case histories of women who sought to be or had become U.S. citizens recently. The project questioned the women not just about the mechanics of their naturalization but also about their ideas of U.S. citizenship, why they had pursued it, or why they had failed to do so. The overwhelming majority of the women questioned were natives of Poland and ethnic Poles. Most of them had been in the United States a decade or longer.

The WPA collection provides a much smaller but more eclectic group of interviews with Polish immigrants in different parts of the country: Polish farmers in Western Massachusetts, Polish immigrant factory workers in the textile mills of New England, and Polish packing house workers in Chicago were the main groups interviewed. The oral histories were collected by the Federal Writers Project (part of the WPA) as part of its American Folk Life Series of life histories between 1936 and 1939 (American Life Histories). The WPA narratives followed the interviewees' preoccupations and ideas rather than a common set of questions. All told, I was able to find and use ten different life stories of Poles and Polish Americans in the WPA database. Men and women were about equally represented in these stories, all of them appeared to be long-time residents, some of them were U.S. born men and women of Polish descent.

The readers of the original edition of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, encountered Poland as a country in the beginning phase of profound social and economic change through migration. By the time Thomas and Znaniecki published the final volume of their study, in 1920, Polish out-migration and, in particular Polish emigration to the United States had already passed it high point. Only about 21,000 Poles arrived in the United States in 1921, compared to over 174,000 in 1913, at the height of the Polish exodus to America. In the decade preceding World War I, the U.S. Immigration Bureau had counted over one million Poles arriving on the shores of the United States (U.S. Immigration Bureau). Historians estimate that the total size of the Polish migration to the United States was actually greater in that period. Since there was no Polish nation state for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, many ethnic Poles were registered as Russian, German, or Austrian by the U.S. authorities, because they carried passports from these countries when they entered the United States. Helena Znaniecka Lopata's estimate of the total number of *ethnic* Polish immigrants to the United States between 1899 and 1919 is therefore higher, at around 1.35 million (Lopata 1976, Greene 1980).

In the context of U.S. immigration up to World War I, Poles were a recent group of arrivals. In 1890 the census had counted only 147,000 Polish-born inhabitants in the United States, 1.6% of all foreign-born residents at that time—a minute number compared to the communities of Irish immigrants (1.8 million) or Germans (2.7 million) who were living in the United States then. (U.S. Census Bureau, 1882, Lopata 1976). A second factor that made Poles in America appear even "younger" was the large number of returnees among them. In general, over a third of all Polish immigrants who entered the United States in the pre-War era left within a few years. Some would return, but most did not. They arrived as single male workers in the United States

and returned home to Poland after a relatively short time to establish a family and a permanent life there. As in the case of other Slavs, Polish workers in the United States were therefore a highly transient community before World War I (Greene, 1980, Wyman 1993). To observers in the 1910s (such as Thomas and Znaniecki or the members of the United States Immigration Commission) they appeared unstable as immigrant communities and held little promise compared to the more stable Germans, and Scandinavians, for example. Permanent social structures, cultural identities and political forms of self-organization would therefore take longer to develop than for older immigrant groups or the less transient Eastern European Jews (Balch**,** Pula 1996, Greene 1976).

The early 1920s marked the shift of Polish America from a recent and transient group of newcomers to an established stable ethnic community. After the end of World War I Polish immigration declined rapidly because of the establishment of independent Poland and secondly, because of restrictive immigration legislation passed in the United States. The founding of a Polish nation meant that the political motivation to leave Poland no longer existed for ethnic Poles. But the economic pressure that underlay much of Polish emigration to Western Europe and North America barely eased, keeping Polish emigrant numbers high through the 1920s. On the other hand, the founding of independent Poland may have increased the desirability of Poland as a country to return home to for many others. Over 120,000 ethnic Poles departed from the United States during the 1920s (Cohen 1993, Walaszek 1989, Lopata 1979).[2] Though many of these men and women were probably just visiting the old homeland, others would stay in Europe for good.

The influence of the quota law on the composition and continuity of the Polish community was more complex. Under the quota law of 1924, Poles were accorded no more than 6,524 immigrant visas a year. As intended by Congress, this cut down the number of new immigrants from Poland to the United States drastically. With its built-in preference for families of U.S. citizens, the law also tended to promote the migration of family members and most of the over 80,000 ethnic Poles who immigrated to the United States during the 1920s were men and women who already had family members in the United States. In many cases such family connections proved to be insufficient as the 1930s Depression in the United States further reduced the availability of visas and the desirability of emigrating to the United States for economic reasons.[3]

The quota regime (not anticipated by Thomas and Znaniecki) slowed down the growth of first generation members of *Polonia*. While the 1920 census counted over 1.1 million U.S. inhabitants born in Poland, the 1930 census counted over 1.2 million.

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[2] The actual net migration effect is difficult measure because the Immigration and Naturalization Service counted only "Arrivals" and "Departures" of immigrants and non-immigrants. While we can assume that arriving immigrants were, in fact immigrating, departing (former) immigrants, might just be visiting European homelands and intended to return. Thus the high number of departures, over 130,000 during the 1920s, does not necessarily reflect a high return migration, just a considerable degree of mobility.

[3] Florian Znaniecki himself spent these years in Poland as a University Professor, though we do not know what his reflections were on the changed situations of Polish migrants in the United States. Znaniecka Lopata (1996) comments on Znaniecki's absence from the U.S. even during a conference held in honor of his work in 1938.

In 1940 the number of Polish born residents community had shrunk to 993,000. The imposition of the quota system also changed the socio-demographic profile of Polish immigrants in favor of those who stayed permanently and in favor of those with spouses and children in the United States.[4] In other words, by 1930, Polish America was no longer a society made up primarily of male transients and very young families. In fact, by the 1930s, second generation Polish Americans were the majority in *Polonia*. In addition, about 50% of the first generation of Polish immigrants were U.S. citizens by then, giving this ethnic group a considerable stake in American public and political life (U.S. Census Bureau 1932).

The Polish-American community of the post-World War I era was quite diverse in terms of its geographic origins. Thomas' and Znaniecki's study had treated Polish emigrants as a generic rural group whose home province was not named, but geography did contribute to the self-definition and cultural identity of Polish immigrants who remained in the United States. Older rural immigrants tended to come from German-speaking Poland along the Baltic (Radzilowski 2002). The most recent Polish immigrants before World War I came from Poland's least urbanized and most agricultural areas in Eastern (Russian and Austrian) Poland (Greene 1980). The Poles in Thomas and Znaniecki's study were representative of the newer group and hailed predominantly from Russian Poland (Zaretzky 1996).

For Polish immigrants, arrival on North American shores brought not necessarily the first taste of urban life. Ethnic Poles in general tended to come from rural areas, but there were city dwellers too and some arrived in the United States after leaving the land at home and living in industrial towns or big cities before immigrating. The Polish immigrants interviewed by the WPA reveal the textures of rural and rural to urban migration within Poland, and the self image of rural immigrants in general. Some came from the countryside but had seen something of the wider world before ending up in the United States. When Katherine Kurona, a woman from rural Poland, explained to her mother "I am going to America," the mother retorted "Find the money!" which prompted to girl to seek work as a farmhand in Germany and later as a servant elsewhere in Poland to save money for the passage. A stopover in Liverpool allowed the young woman to see the wider world before heading for New York and Manchester, New Hampshire ("Here we can be glad," ALH). Louis F. who lived in Chicago in the 1930s, came from a small town in Poland and migrated via Berlin, Amsterdam, and Havana, Cuba to the United States ("I sell fish," ALH). Breckinridge found women from Warsaw or Krakow in her sample of Chicago Polish women (Breckinridge 1931).

In the United States, Poles settled in both rural and urban areas throughout the Northeast and Midwest. While the histories of Polish America are dominated by the struggles of industrial workers in mining, steel mills and slaughterhouses, a significant number of Polish immigrants worked as farmers or farmhands in rural areas from Western Massachusetts to Texas. The ability to pursue a rural life may have been

[4] An exemption from the quota for academics, persons of high achievement and religious workers had little effect on the social composition of Polish Americans, though Znaniecki himself, after 1939 a Professor at the University of Illinois, was a likely beneficiary of this exemption.

an unfulfilled dream for most Polish Americans, but communities of Polish farmers settled in the Minnesota prairies, the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts and many other states where they adapted successfully growing wheat, tobacco and other crops. Others fit into the numerous small businesses and retail operations in growing metropolises (Greene 1980, Walaszek 1989). For many, especially for factory and slaughterhouse workers, life in the United States was completely different from what was left behind, but for many thousands of others, life in the New World showed a continuity in agriculture, small town or metropolitan life.

The majority of the groups interviewed by Breckinridge and the WPA, had experienced Polish rural life as difficult but intact. "Our life on the farm was not easy but it was not too harsh" commented Adam Laboda about his old home (Adam Laboda, ALH). But for Louis F. the pressure to feed a family with two children and avoid military service at age 21 made the future look grim in 1921 (I Sell Fish, ALH). Often it was the letters of a cousin or a brother from the United States that motivated young people to leave, but in contrast to Thomas and Znaniecki, who saw this decision as driven by adventuresomeness and little sense of self-direction, some of the women questioned by Breckinridge were self-motivated to leave. A Mrs. Lugorewicz declared to the Chicago researchers that she always wanted to come to America and "had worked and saved for years to achieve this goal as a single dressmaker." (Breckinridge 1931: 80). Like Katherine Kurona, these women took the initiative and joined cousins or aunts and uncles on their own, not out of family solidarity, because they saw economic opportunity in the United States for themselves.

The occupational choices most Poles faced in North America were not grand. Lack of a formal education beyond the elementary level, lack of English skills and prejudice against Poles meant that most of them were confined to unskilled labor. But there were some choices and there was occupational diversity within Polish America by the post World War I period. The WPA interviewers found Poles in textile mills, as household workers, farmers, in steel mills and packing houses. Breckinridge also found them in the garment industry, as petty entrepreneurs and general laborers. Some were priests, teachers, musicians and professors. My sample is not representative of the Polish community in the United States, but it indicates more breadth than the Poles described in Thomas' and Znaniecki's study. More importantly, the immigrants interviewed by the WPA and by Breckinridge highlight the central importance of work to Polish Americans. In both the WPA narratives and in Breckinridge's accounts men and women often indicated that they made a choice of doing certain work at least after the initial settlement and they emphasized that their choice was a good one within the parameters of their lives. The Warshalaski, Laboda and Mankowski families were, at least to their interviewers, exemplary for persistence, prudence and hard work. These families had come before World War One, saved to buy some land in Western Massachusetts and become farmers. The land may not have been the most fertile, but the families managed to wring meaningful life from it by farming. Chicago shopkeepers also showed systematic and frugal habits in order to establish themselves. Breckinridge commented about her urban interview partners: "A well kept grocery store, and expanding bakery and other businesses kept them engaged and purposeful."

(Breckinridge 1931: 69–70). Mill workers and packing house workers were seen as less self-determined, though even in these cases, the women workers interviewed by Betty Burke of the WPA showed a keen awareness of their status as workers in particular parts of a meat processing plant, and some aspired to better work and working conditions within the meatpacking districts ("Packing House Workers," ALH).

Forms of social and political incorporation in the New World showed more continuities than Thomas and Znaniecki were willing to acknowledge in their studies. Fraternal organizations, often around a common geographic origin, were widespread even before World War I. Complex voluntary networks around churches and parishes became a dominant feature of Polonia in the late nineteenth century. For Thomas' and Znaniecki's peasants, the predominant form of group organization was shaped by the relatively authoritarian model of the Catholic church. The authors described a rudimentary and highly localized set of organizations focused on ethnic parishes and benevolent organizations attached to them. Only a few groups, such as the Polish American Alliance represented a self-consciously transnational community even before World War I. The distance between such community building and an engagement with the "outside" world, that is with co-workers, cities and ultimately the American state as a whole remained very large in Thomas' and Znaniecki's study. Full citizenship and participation in what could be called American society remained an impossibly distant goal. This reflected the judgment of many contemporary American observers of Polish (and other Slavic) immigrants of the time. Poles were commonly seen as deficient in culture, leadership qualities and intellectual capacity. While these judgments were not based on extensive research or first hand testimony, they reflected the common anti-Polish prejudice of the era (Greene 1976, Walszek 1989, Radzilowski 2002, Pula 1996). The voice of American Polonia at the end of World War One remained muffled, its own assessments of the future in the United States were not heard.[5]

The interviews of the WPA and those of the Chicago researchers under Breckinridge show that, when asked, Polish immigrants were quite aware of the cultural and social distance between themselves and mainstream America. At times they spoke eloquently about how to overcome the gap between their traditional lives and expectations and the demands of modern U.S. society. Katherine Kurona remembered that when she arrived in Manchester, N.H. she could not identify any Poles at the railroad station because none wore "old country" clothes. "They laughed and teased her about her old country clothes" recorded the interviewer. "The next day she discarded her clothes…With some misgivings but with great bravado and faith she packs her old country things and the cousins send them back to her sister in Poland." (Here we can be glad, ALH). In the future Mrs. Kurona would wear the clothes of her country of origin only on special occasions—as a costume and part of a parade, for example. Miss McGinnis, the Home Economics teacher at a Manchester High School concurred. : "The Polish girls seem to want to be American, do everything Americans do. They prefer the clothing course, as they have a dress." (Poles of Manchester ALH).

[5] This muted assessment may reflect a disagreement of Thomas and Znaniecki over the opportunities presented by the new Polish nation and Polish nationalism in the U.S. see discussion of this in Evan A. Thomas' article on Thomas and Znaniecki (1992).

Father Bronislaw Krupski, priest of the Holy Trinity Church in Manchester, N.H. and a long-time observer of his parishioners' struggles in America, had a more sceptical view of this sort of Americanization. He considered his fellow Polish Americans "clannish, hot tempered, holding on to traditions." Yet, he also thought that his parishioners were only declaring their adherence to Polish culture in a superficial way. He commented that for them "the place for tradition is in a frame hung on the wall." Krupski, a priest with the Polish National Catholic Church and thus a representative of a deeply ethnic Catholicism, also wanted to promote a higher degree of civic culture and knowledge about America for his parishioners. He tried to further this by holding citizenship classes in his parish office and threatening those who did not take steps to become U.S. citizens with deportation. But, as he acknowledged, poverty, lack of education and the desire to make money on the part of his parishioners hindered this efforts (The Poles of Manchester ALH).

Despite Krupski's pessimism, Polish immigrants were among the most enthusiastic group of immigrants when it came to naturalization in the inter-war years. The Bureau of Naturalization (part of the U.S. Immigration Bureau) recorded that from 1924 until 1940, Polish immigrants consistently ranked among the top three or four nationalities of immigrants who succeeded at becoming U.S. citizens.[6] According to the Census of Population, almost 60% of all Poles in the United States had become U.S. citizens by 1940. The percentage was even higher (70%) for Polish men. Poles were also among the largest nationality groups enrolling in citizenship classes in the 1920s (United States Bureau of Naturalization 1921–1932, Immigration and Naturalization Service Annual Report 1944, United States Census Bureau 1930, 1940, Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1934–1940). By themselves, these data refuted the pessimism of earlier observers regarding the willingness and ability of Polish immigrants to integrate into the civic society of the United States.

Polish immigrants were likely motivated by a variety of factors to become U.S. citizens in the inter-war period. U.S. citizenship meant that one could gain the right to bring one's family over to the United States exempt from the quota or under preference provisions. This may have played an important role for adult men. During the 1930s the fear of deportation for poor and unemployed men and women and the desire to get a WPA job or to qualify for relief also motivated many. The generally hostile climate against non-naturalized immigrants almost certainly played an important role as well. Adam Laboda, a textile worker in Western Massachusetts observed to a WPA interviewer that while he would always be a Pole at home in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, on a visit back in Poland "I was not called a Polack, I was always called an American and it made me very proud."(Adam Laboda, ALH). Naturalization firmed up his claim to Americanness not just in the eyes of the people in Poland. Not all Polish immigrants had specific motivations to naturalize as U.S. citizens. Some just thought, that after more than a decade of living in the United States, the time had

[6] The other top groups were Italians and citizens of the British Empire (English, Irish, Canadians, Scots and Welsh immigrants) and Germans. If Irish and Canadian are counted separately, Poles moved into third or second place during most years (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service Annual Report, 1924–1940).

come. As one of Breckinridge's interviewees told her in response to the question why she wanted to be an American citizen: "But why shouldn't we? This is our home here!"(Breckinridge 1931: 76).

Poles also saw naturalization as an expression of their political and social assimilation and economic upward mobility. Middle class Polish-American organizations of the 1920s and 30s such as "The Chicago Society" emphasized their members' status as U.S. citizens and promoted the use of the English language role in its meetings and publications as a sign of its members' Americanization (Galush 1999). Some of the women interviewed by Breckinridge were the main instigators of naturalization and were the first to see the potential for social mobility that such a step entailed for their families. Mrs. Daneshevky became a U.S. citizen on her own, after her husband failed to financially support her and her family adequately. She opened her own shop "and she makes more money than her husband ever earned," observed Breckinridge. "Being a citizen gives one more prestige and standing in the community" this woman, a member of a benevolent society, noted to Breckinridge (1931: 70). Mr. and Mrs. Donorowics were ordinary working class citizens of Chicago, but their identity as Americans was influenced by the example of their children who attended Chicago Public Schools. "Well, when you want to live here and vote, you have to know something about the country" declared Mrs. Donorowicz, explaining her naturalization (Breckinridge 1931: 70). Likewise, Mrs. Dvirowski and Mrs. Garnoski both took out naturalization papers, supported by their husbands, with whom they ran small businesses. Some of these men and women also took part in political discussions in their Polish American clubs (Breckinridge 1931).

Both the WPA interviewers and Breckinridge noted that Polish women enrolled in English classes with some enthusiasm. For some, learning and speaking the language proved to be nearly impossible and attendance in class was sporadic. As Katherine Kurona told the WPA interviewer, "Work in mill all day. Come home, work all evening. Wash, clean, iron, cook, care for little children. Too busy-go to school" ("Here we Can be Glad" ALH). As interviewers noted, however, the English and civics classes offered more benefits to Polish American women than mere language skills. Katherine Kurona, for example was motivated by her exposure to the larger world through the citizenship class to take a job as a maid as soon as her children were older. This allowed her to more easily withstand her husband's alcoholism (emotionally and financially). She became a US citizen on her own in the mid 1930s. In some cases the incentives for poor working class women to become U.S. citizens were also quite specific. The state of Illinois, for example, had instituted a system of "mothers pensions" in 1911, one of the first states in the nation to do so. By the time of Breckinridge's study in the mid and late 1920s, the system was well enough established in Chicago, that it provided regular support payments to women who had children to support but who were widowed, had been deserted by their husbands or had husbands were unable to provide for the family (Gordon 1994). But in order to qualify for these payments, county social workers demanded that the applicants become American citizens, learn English and prove their status as socially and morally deserving members of the community. Breckinridge's study showed the considerable hurdles many immigrant

women had to overcome in order to pass the dreaded English exam and civics test, so that they could become U.S. citizens, receive mothers pensions and thus maintain their families with a minimum of financial support. It was difficult for them to take out time for formal instruction and in many cases acquire elementary literacy (Breckinridge 1931). Many women tried but failed to pass, others prevailed and were able to get support payments and keep their families together. Commenting on the ways the government measured success and failure in the quest to become American citizens for Polish American women, Breckinridge commented "A number of cases could be cited of women who manage their homes well, perhaps care for a sick husband, get their children perhaps through high school, but do not satisfy the examiners."(113–14). Such women may have failed to qualify as political citizens but to Breckinridge they had proved their worth as social citizens. They showed "the performance of dignified , competent, affectionate, domestic, neighborhood and civic duties that are of very great importance to the America of the next century." Breckinridge therefore called for a possible revision of naturalization requirements in such cases (138).

As Breckinridge's study showed, many Polish families had a difficult time staying afloat, even in the relatively prosperous 1920s. But compared to the previous decade the Great Depression brought much more widespread hardship to the largely blue collar Polish immigrant community. Poles in industrial occupations suffered disproportionately from unemployment and under-employment, since so many worked in blue collar industries that were particularly hard hit by the Depression. Mothers pensions proved inadequate and Catholic charities in Polish areas were overwhelmed by their parishioners' needs. Though Father Krupski counted only 14 of his flock on public relief in Manchester N.H. in 1938, other interviewers noted the universally modest circumstances of their interview partners. Lack of money meant a postponement of plans for higher education, a lack of occupational mobility in general, and a need to stay together as a family even as children grew into adults. As in the case of other recent immigrants groups (Italians and Greeks for example) the upward mobility of Polish immigrants was delayed for a generation as the Depression hit both the older generation and the second generation of Polish Americans. In many cases, younger members of a family and women had an easier time finding work, than men—undercutting the traditional authority structures in Polish-American families. The WPA narratives show how unemployment and underployment cut short plans and altered the symmetry of family life. Helen Wocz, a second-generation Polish American had to give up her dream to become a nun and instead had to go to work in the stockyards at age 16, because her family was too poor to afford further schooling. Ten years later, in 1939 she had five children and lived with her husband and her tubercular mother in a run-down small house with no indoor plumbing ("Packing House Workers," ALH). Mary Siporin went to Englewood High school at night for four years, but all this qualified her for was the (relatively easy) work in the bacon slicing department at the Armour Packing House (Mary Siporin, ALH). The Warshalaski family of New Marlborough, Massachusetts lived on a well tended farm of forty acres, but managed to survive only because two members of the family worked in the nearby mills and another worked as a maid in a village home. Only one son was on the

farm full time. John Mankowski, also in Western Massachusetts, recounted the low prices he was offered for his crops and the difficulty he and other Poles of the Pioneer Valley had to sell their tobacco harvest at a profit ("Tony Warshalaski," ALH).

Beyond the need to cope with economic hardship and social instability, the Depression years also prompted Polish Americans to reflect more deeply about their place in America as political citizens. The results of the WPA interviews show that Poles were ambivalent about many aspects of the American political and economic order. The tobacco farmer Mankowski thought that Americans had a limited understanding of the crisis and the possible remedies for it. "Here people vote for politician who make law for business man… some people tell them, Communism bad. They don't know nothing about it. They no think for self." He thought a dose of communism might not be such a bad thing for the Yankees that he lived with ("Mr. Mankowski," ALH). At the same time, Mankowski refused to give up his sceptical distance, become a U.S. citizen and vote. Others interviewed by the WPA were more engaged. Adam Laboda, the textile worker from Pittsfield, was a U.S. citizen and supported Roosevelt and the New Deal with enthusiasm. But he refused to join the Textile Workers Union which had tried to organize his mill. It was one thing to support Franklin Roosevelt in rural Massachusetts, but membership in a CIO union was too radical a step for this cautious immigrant ("Adam Laboda"ALH).

The situation was different in the communities with large numbers of Polish immigrants who worked in the same industries. In the Back-of-the-Yard neighborhood in Chicago where the WPA interviewed men and women from Polish families union sentiment ran high. Polish immigrants had been part of the struggle for unionization in key Chicago industries since the 1890s. But the workplaces where Poles were concentrated were also the battlefields of labor struggle, especially in the first decades of the twentieth century. Not until the mid-1930s did unions make permanent advances in industries where Polish immigrants had worked for decades: mining, steel, meat packing and textiles. Polish immigrants and their children rallied in large numbers to join the CIO-affiliated unions during the second half of the 1930s. By 1945 about 1/10 of the 6 million CIO members were of Polish origin. Among the Polish-American working class a sense of citizenship had become inseparable from a sense of belonging to both union and the Polish community by the mid 1930s. As an Irish American worker explained to WPA interviewer Betty Burke:

> "The Polish girls, some of them, they'll say: Ah, let my husband join. Let my husband go to meetings. Let the men do it, it's not for women to do. But once they got interested. Boy o boy. They'll get up and talk their hearts out and they'll fight like troopers for the union, you can't hold them down. Some of the most religious Polish women are the most surprising. They really go to town when they get started with the union." ("Packing House Workers," ALH).

Helen Wocz, who had wanted to be a nun when she was younger, was "a member of the union. Thinks a lot of it," reported the WPA interviewer. "Being very religious, she laments the fact that in her church, the priest has told the women to remain away from the union meetings saying that the union leaders are atheistic." ("Packing House Workers," ALH). But Mrs. Wocz did not care for the exhortations of the priest and remained in the CIO. This was also true of others interviewed whose main source of

solidarity was the community and the union rather than the Catholic church ("Packing House Workers," "Mary Siporin," "Betty Puionkowski," ALH). Clearly, amidst the very difficult circumstances of the Great Depression, Polish industrial workers had succeeded in building a new set of communal institutions which served them both as an ethnic community and as members of a national working class.

The 1920s and 1930s were a crucial decade for Polish immigrants and their children. During this time Poles in many parts of the country and in different occupations made the transition from an relatively insular immigrant group focused on its own survival to a population who had become aware of its economic and social stake in U.S. society (Cohen 1990, Kantowicz 1995). My findings show that Polish Americans took on the challenges that came with this new perspective in many different ways. From the desire to be upwardly mobile and assimilate into the American mainstream to the union struggles of the New Deal, Polish immigrants and their children were well aware of the many different routes that could be taken. Especially the more distant assessment of America's challenges and rewards by rural and small town Polish Americans captured in the WPA interviews show that Poles were both individualists and community oriented, they were interested in the homeland, but saw their future in America. They were enthusiastic about becoming American but also distant to some American habits and instructions. *The Polish Peasant* contributed to and fit into the United States in literally thousands of ways.

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