

The Polish ethnic group in Canada



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Poles have for almost 140 years been vitally interested in Canada as a migration country. At the end of the 19th century the first organized group of Polish immigrants arrived in Canada. They were Kashubes from Pomerania whose sixth generation is inhabiting now the area of the Madawaski Upland in the province of Ontario.

The stream of Polish immigration to Canada on a mass scale started in 1896 and has since then been pouring with a varied intensity due to economical, political and social conditions under which the two countries remained. Polish newcomers of the pioneer period from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries formed part of the immigration from East Europe. They were settlers and farmers who considerably supported the Canadian plans of developing the vast territories of the western prairies, and strengthened the political processes of integration of the young Canadian state.

The years between the First and Second World Wars saw a continuation of settler's immigration

from Poland to Canada. That immigration amounted to over 140.000 persons. Polish immigration had radically changed after the Second World War. Until 1957 it had been a secondary immigration (i.e. they did not come directly from Polish territories but from England, Germany, and Italy), and they arrived in Canada due to political reasons or to find a job. They were mainly soldiers from the Polish Armed Forces in the West and the so-called dipisi (displaced persons). Their number is estimated at 60.000.

The later period, until 1981, had brought about a diverse pattern of immigration. The immigrants then, whose number during 20 years reached about 40.000, arrived in Canada for political and economical reasons, or to join their families. The period after 1981 (that is following the transformations brought on by the action of the Solidarity Movement in Poland) was significant for the Canadian Polonia. In the period of only five years (1981–1986) a large number of Poles arrived in Canada from Poland or from the European camps for political refugees (in Germany, Austria, and Italy), reaching 30.000 people. Ac-

cording to the census of the 1980s the Polish ethnic group in Canada ranked eighth as regards its size, and numbered 404.475, taking into account the double criterion of ethnic membership (on the father's and mother's side).

The social section

Canadian Polonia during over 140 years in this country has undergone marked socio-demographic changes. First of all, from a decidedly agricultural community it has turned into a group holding various jobs. Before the Second World War there came peasants, agricultural workers and female house servants, for only such categories of immigrants from east central Europe were accepted by the Canadian migrational policy. That period was marked by the total lack of the Polish intelligentsia, its only representatives being not too numerous Polish Catholic priests.

After the Second World War and in the 1980s Polonia is characterized by a dynamic developmental process of professional and social careers. During the war a group of specialists (engineers, pilots, and chemists) arrived in

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Canada. They joined actively the development of Canadian economy. In 1941 the first Polish professional organization appeared, i.e. the Association of Polish Technicians. The composition of Polonia would undergo transformations in the following periods on behalf of non-agricultural, free jobs, and services. This was due to the influx of Polish specialists and also the change of the level of education, as well as professional preferences of the young generation of the Poles educated in Canada.

Up to the 1980s Canadian Polonia had introduced into the scientific life of the country over 300 lecturers and scientific workers, who worked at the Canadian universities and research institutes, and a few dozen originators of various branches of art. Their achievements have won general acclaim. The immigration of the 1980s gave such tendencies a new impetus. The *Biographic Dictionary of Canadian Polonia* published in 1992 points to a very broad occupational range of Polonia at the level of university education in comparison with technical secondary education.

The great intellectual and occupational potential of Poles, especially of the newcomers, did not always safeguard employment in Canada in accord with their education and skills. Many of Polish specialists felt the mid-1980s as a very severe, though, fortunately, transitory period. It was the period of occupational degradation, owing to the crisis in the Canadian job market and difficulties in obtaining an official recognition of a foreign diploma or scholarly degree.

Polish scouts in Toronto, Ontario, 1982.



The immigration of the 1980s and 1990s is especially marked in the former migration waves from Poland. The immigrants then are very young, a fact which consequently lowered the mean age of the whole Polish community in Canada. In the end of the 1970s that community tended to grow old.

The geographic distribution

The socio-occupational character of Polish immigration had directly influenced the location and development of the Polish communities in Canada. From the mid-19th century onward, almost to the end of the 1980s, that is to the completion of the trans-Canadian railway, the settlement action in Canada, of necessity, embraced only the territories of the province of Ontario. Therefore Kashubian immigration was sent there. Until the end of the 1930s Canada directed Polish settlers and agricultural workers to the area of the three prairie provinces designed for development, that is to Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Accordingly, the phenomenon of concentrating Poles in agricultural territories increased. Such tendencies were reversed after the

Second World War together with the influx of Polish immigrants for non-agricultural jobs into Canadian towns. From the beginning of the 1980s about 80% of Polonia had already lived in towns, especially in big urban areas of the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. The manifest process of urbanization of Canadian Polonia is laconically defined as the *Winnipeg-Toronto transformations*. Speaking now about the main settlements of Canadian Polonia, one mentions a dozen or so biggest cities of Canada: Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Edmonton, Hamilton, Vancouver, Winnipeg, Calgary, St. Catharine, Regina, and Saskatoon. The Polish ethnic group, despite its concentration in these centres, does not form compact Polish districts in cities, nor in any other area of the settlements. Rather, they live in dispersion, with the exception, to a certain extent, of the group of Kashubes in the vicinity of Renfrew, Ont.

In the whole history of Polonia in Canada there were many patterns of settlement. It is the Kashubian and peasant's settlement in the prairies that is the most interesting and significant for the history of

Polonia. The Kashubian settlement was spatially compact and socially integrated. Therefore it was culturally homogeneous and for a long time quite isolated from the influence of other cultures. Thus several generations have preserved their Kashubian language, traditions, religion, specific material culture, and the consistency of the group. Now as a result of the settlement in the farms the model of the Polish-Ukrainian settlements was quite universal. It was due to common immigration of the nationalities from the eastern territories of Poland before 1939. In Canada, especially before the First World War, it bore fruit with their collaboration in many spheres of everyday life. The process of making the Polish group Ruthenian was also well under way, as regards the language and customs, owing to the dominance of the Ukrainian community over the Polish community and due to numerous mixed marriages. The influence of the Ukrainian language and culture on the Polish rural immigrants was effectively inhibited only by their membership of the Roman Catholic Church and pastoral care in Polish among the Poles.

In terms of geography, the Poles recently coming to Canada clearly prefer to settle in the metropolis of Toronto. The newcomers, however, manifest a considerable geographic mobility, choosing as their settlement, above all, such places where they can find a good job and a flat. It seems that to find support in the stabilized and traditional Polish community is of lesser importance, for the young newcomers from Poland quite quickly and easily overcome the

linguistic barrier and adapt to the customs of the Canadian milieu.

Organizations

Each wave of Polish immigration established their own associations and organizations. The oldest organizations bore the religious or self-help character. Initially, social organizations of the Polish immigrants dealt with the establishment of a committee designed to establish religious care, to construct a chapel or church, or to establish a parish. With time, there appeared associations designed to support culture, education, politics, and charitable actions. Until the Second World War Winnipeg, Man., was the centre of the institutional life of Poles, later to be taken over by Toronto and Montreal. It is here where the central organizations had their headquarters, e.g. the Congress of Canadian Polonia numbering over 200 local organizations, the Association of Polish Veterans, the Society of Poles in Canada, the Society of Polish Teachers in Canada, the Federation of Polish Women, the Society of Polish Scouting in Canada, and many others.

In the 1980s new associations were established, all of them originating from the Solidarity Movement: aid committees to Poland, committees of aid to Polish immigrants in Canada, and charitable foundations. In 1988 Toronto was the home of over 125 Polish associations, institutions, clubs, and organizations. The Polish parishes as well as other posts of Polish pastoral care are also developed and become resilient, their number amounting to 222.

The Poles in Canada develop a publishing, journalistic, and educational activity. They have two scientific and research institutes: the Canadian-Polish Research Institute and the Polish Scientific Institute in Montreal, as well as a very good Polish Library at McGill University in Montreal. Polonia has established three foundations designed to support Polish culture in Canada: Perpetual Foundation of the Millennium of Christian Poland, the Adam Mickiewicz Foundation, and the Wladyslaw Reymont Foundation; it runs a dozen or so press titles of a diverse profile, ranging from the Catholic to the leftist; it has an access to Canadian radio and television (in the 1990s the Poles had 20 radio programmes in Polish broadcast from 11 Polish centres).

It is worth mentioning a special investment venture, which the Polonia of Windsor, Ontario, may be proud of. On the initiative of the Rev. Wawrzyniec Wnuk, the parish priest of the Polish parish in Windsor, several Polish businessmen from Canada and with the financial support of the local Polish community a profit-making district of houses called "Polonia Park" was built. In 1985 a modern, imposing recreational-cultural centre called "Polonia Centre" was opened. The two centres serve the whole community of Windsor.

Canadian Polonia has numerous successes but its potential is still bigger and has not been put into practice yet. It seems that it lacks appropriate power of social cooperation to use those potentials, which many of its members manifest during an individual career in Canada.