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POLISH ETHNORELIGION IN EAST TEXAS: THE CASE OF ST. JOSEPH'S PARISH, 1866-1900

by James S. Olson

During the past two decades, an intellectual revolution has swept through American historiography, displacing traditional economic and political themes and enthroning a new set of social and economic concerns. Preoccupation with the history of elites, which dominated professional scholarship throughout most of the twentieth century, has given way to an obsession with common people — how they lived and how they influenced the development of American institutions. Within the larger field of social history, the rise of ethnicity as a premier scholarly interest has been little less than spectacular. Even the most casual comparison of contemporary journals with their counterparts in the 1950s and 1960s reveals the transformation of historical inquiry. Each year more well-researched monographs on different groups appear, laying the foundations for a new synthesis on American history. In many instances, the interest in the lives of common people has resurrected local history, but not in any antiquarian context. By asking significant questions about local communities, social historians shed light on much broader aspects of American life. The processes of migration, settlement, institution-building, and assimilation, even for small groups of people, relate to all Americans, since the vast majority of us or our ancestors shared those experiences.

Until the 1870s, most immigrants came to the United States from Northern and Western Europe. Light in complexion, Protestant in religion, and agricultural in their backgrounds, they moved with relative ease into American society, taking up farms in the hinterlands or moving into skilled jobs in fledgling industries. The famine Irish, of course, were the exception to that rule, and they stirred up an unprecedented wave of nativism and anti-Catholicism, but many Americans for most of those early years viewed immigration as an asset, a source of cheap labor and cultural vitality. All that changed in the 1880s when economic changes in Eastern and Southern Europe began driving millions of Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Jews to the urban centers of the United States. Between 1880 and 1930, these people arrived and settled into an Anglo-Protestant culture which was not prepared to receive them. Instead of the comparatively easy acceptance experienced by the English, Scots, Germans, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians, they witnessed several decades of nativism and discrimination. In Texas, the experience was somewhat different, especially for large numbers of Czech and Polish immigrants, because so many of them settled in rural, farming colonies where their religion and culture thrived in relative isolation. St. Joseph's Parish, a Roman Catholic

colony in New Waverly, Texas, provides an excellent case study of a rural, "new immigrant" community.¹

Polish origins in Texas dated back to the earliest years of the colony, and included people such as Constantin Malczewski, a founder of the Champ D'Asile colony in 1818 near present-day Liberty; Joseph A. Czczyryn, who invaded Texas on a filibuster expedition in 1821; Simon Weiss, a merchant trader who settled near Nacogdoches in 1836; and Felix Wardzinski, a member of the revolutionary army that defeated Santa Anna at San Jacinto in 1836.² But it was not until the 1850s that large numbers of Polish immigrants began to settle in Texas. Enormous population growth, declining farm size, competition from American wheat, and the elimination of cottage industry had undermined village economies in Eastern Europe, forcing peasants to move about as a nomadic proletariat in search of work. Eventually, many of them decided on America as the solution to their problems. Here there was land, jobs, freedom, and opportunity.³

Most of the Poles who settled in the United States did not find that land; they ended up working the mines, mills, factories, and packinghouses of such cities as Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Buffalo, but the Poles who came to Texas were exceptions. They found land, tried to reconstruct their peasant villages, and maintained the ethnoreligion of the Old World. Between 1854 and 1857, nearly 1,500 Poles from Upper Silesia came to Central Texas, with the largest colony at Panna Maria. From there they expanded widely throughout Central and South Central Texas.⁴

Polish immigrants began arriving in Walker County in the mid-1860s. Vincenty Radkiewicz arrived at Galveston on September 15, 1860, and came north to work. A few Polish families came to Walker County in 1866 to work on the Lamkin Plantation on the Trinity River. Later that year, worried about harvesting their cotton, a small group of Walker County planters met to find a way to replace their emancipated slaves. At the suggestion of Meyer Levy, a Polish Jew operating a store at Old Waverly, they established the Waverly Emigration Society. Representing the Society, Levy went to Europe hoping to attract 150 workers, enticing them with full passage and wages of room, board, and \$90, \$100, and \$110 for each of the first three years. It amounted to an indentured servant status. In May 1867, Levy returned with the first group of immigrants, most of whom came from Poznan and Silesia. They immediately went to work as farm laborers, and their presence attracted other Poles to Old Waverly. A merchant in Navasota also recruited Polish immigrants, as did several plantation owners in San Jacinto County. The Poles worked in the cotton fields and in sawmills. By 1870 there were forty-two families living in Old Waverly.⁵

No passion was stronger in the peasant mind than acquisition of land. It was the essence of peasant life — a social and economic constant determining status in the world. From noblemen with thousands of acres to

peasants, property was the measure of existence. Land was life and fertility, and far more than an economic asset. Peasants worked it not just to make a living but to stake out their destiny in the universe. Ownership of land brought recognition, status, and prestige in the rural villages. In the words of W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, two early sociologists of peasant life,

Land property is . . . the main condition of the social standing of the family. Without land, the family can still keep its internal solidarity, but it cannot act as a unit with regard to the rest of the community; it ceases to count as a social power. Its members become socially and economically dependent on strangers, and often scatter about the country or abroad; . . . The greater the amount of land, the greater the possibility of social expression.⁶

For the bulk of Polish immigrants settling in the congested ghettos of the Midwest and Northeast, acquisition of land was impossible, but for the Texas Poles the need could be fulfilled. During the 1860s and 1870s their status as landless laborers working on cotton plantations remained unchanged, but gradually they began to accumulate enough excess capital to fulfill the desperate need for property. By the 1880s the Polish immigrants were buying substantial amounts of farm property around Old Waverly, and Walker County deed records clearly demonstrate that by the end of the century they had managed to acquire most of the best farm land along the southeastern edge of the county. At St. Joseph's Parish in the late nineteenth century, the immigrants and their children had successfully reconstructed the peasant village of the Old World.⁷

If ownership of land guaranteed status in this life, religion guaranteed it in the next. The peasant religion of Old as well as New World Poles was the marrow of their cultural existence, explaining the mysteries and tragedies of life, providing peasants with a reassuring knowledge of the cosmos, directing the pace and substance of social life, and helping supply them with a powerful sense of ethnic identity. For most Poles the Roman Catholic Church was a revered institution bringing meaning into their lives. In celebrating festivals, honoring patron saints, joining sodalities and confraternities, attending parish schools, and partaking of the sacraments of the church, they came to terms with life and death.

Polish ethnoreligion at St. Joseph's was a mixture of folk tradition and formal worship, with the church providing supernatural intervention when folk values seemed inadequate. Peasants viewed the natural world from a unique perspective, uniting all nature into a cosmic whole. Animals, plants, minerals, sun, moon, stars, and the earth were alive, imbued with a measure of knowledge, individual consciousness, and awareness of the things around them. Peasants gave every animal, tree, river, stream, meadow, mountain, hill, or valley a name, as well as such periods of time as days, weeks, months, and seasons. All of creation had a spiritual essence, and there was a balance and solidarity to nature which man had

to respect carefully. In thought and deed, people had to honor nature, taking and killing only that which was necessary for survival. When coming upon a poisonous snake, for example, the peasant would much prefer to avoid the reptile or scare it off than to have to kill it. Disobedience and disrespect toward nature could easily ignite vengeance and retaliation by the elements. On the other hand, careful observation of the behavior of plants, animals, and the elements helped peasants predict the future, avoid danger and tragedy, and control the fears, decay, sickness, and misery leading to death. What another generation would call superstition was actually a highly complicated, integrated spiritual network linking all natural activities into a holistic unity. The sacred and profane, the spiritual and temporal, were one.

Beyond the world of natural animals, objects, and phenomena, peasant religion functioned in the world of spirits. For the Polish immigrants, the existence of such mythological beings as devils, witches, dwarfs, water spirits, house ghosts, goblins, cloud-beings, vampires, nightmares, and generalized spiritual entities was taken for granted. They functioned actively in the world according to supernatural laws, and when the events of nature seemed disruptive or illogical, the peasants blamed those spirits and appealed to magic for understanding and control. The ultimate source of magical power was the heavenly magic of God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and the pantheon of saints and angels. For most peasants, the activities of God and Jesus were detached and distant, rarely interrupting the usual flow of the natural world. Poles turned instead to the Virgin for their magic — to heal the sick, ward off evil, and avert danger. Their devotion bordered on Mariolatry, and the most hallowed shrine in the country was that of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. They also used saints and angels to fight devils, praise God, and perform highly specialized duties. St. Agatha, for example, was the saint Poles turned to for assistance in putting out fires. Agricultural life revolved around a complex religious calendar. First plowing was reserved for St. Gregory's Day. Turnips and cabbage were sown on St. Mark the Evangelist Day and then transplanted on St. Vitus Day. They sowed flax on St. Adalbert's Day and hoed potatoes before St. John the Baptist Day.

Although heavenly magic and its concourse of living, benevolent spirits were overpowering, the evil magic of satanic spirits was very real, a force to be reckoned with through the power of heavenly magic. By seeing life in terms of magical causality, peasants learned to deal with their environment, avoiding the fatalistic surrender to outside forces which political oppression and economic poverty had often spawned. The natural and supernatural worlds of Polish folk religion died rather quickly in the major cities of the United States, where the agricultural calendar was unnecessary and the geographic symbols, animals, and plants of the Old World lost their meaning. But in Walker County, Texas, where the Polish

immigrants functioned in a rural, village atmosphere, the folk traditions of the European past thrived in the nineteenth century.⁸

Finally, peasant religion existed on the formal level of ceremonial Catholicism. Parish activities bound peasants into a moral, communal whole. In the chapel and its surrounding cemetery occurred the most important events of life; peasants sacrificed to build a church and then treated it with reverence and adoration. Villages of poverty-stricken families living in huts in Poznan and Silesia had lovely churches. Life without a church and priest was unimaginable. The church and Polish identity were inseparable. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Russian and Prussian governments bordering Poland and Lithuania viewed Roman Catholicism as a form of political treason and a cultural intrusion. After taking Poland and Lithuania, Russian authorities tried in vain to restrict the church and suppress the peasant languages throughout the nineteenth century. In 1864 and 1865, just before the Walker Emigration Society began bringing Poles to Texas, the Tsar had ordered all teaching of religion in public schools to be in Russian, and shortly thereafter ordered the use of Russian as the language of instruction in Roman Catholic parochial schools as well. Russian authorities injected their language into Catholic liturgies, outlawed crosses on Catholic churches, prohibited devotional processions on religious holidays, demanded prior approval of clerical appointments, censored all sermons, eliminated clerical visits with parishioners, and stopped the construction of new chapels or the repair of old ones. But instead of transforming Polish Catholicism into Russian Orthodoxy, the campaign only exaggerated Catholic identity. During the late 1800s, Polish peasants became the most devoted Roman Catholics on the Continent, and they brought that faith with them to East Texas.⁹

News of the Polish colony at Old Waverly spread quickly to other Polish communities. In 1870, Bishop C.M. DuBois of Galveston invited the Resurrectionist Fathers to take care of all Polish immigrants in the diocese, and the order sent Father Felix Orzechowski to Old Waverly. The Congregation of the Resurrection was a new Roman Catholic order, founded in 1842 by Polish emigres of the insurrection of 1830. They were especially strong in the Polish emigrant communities of France and the United States, and many of the Resurrectionists came as missionary priests to Texas to work in the Polish colonies. Intensely nationalistic as well as devoted to Roman Catholicism, the Resurrectionists created an overpowering ethnocentric atmosphere in the Polish colonies, including St. Joseph's at Old Waverly. Mass and other meetings were held in different homes for nearly five years, when a small church was constructed eight miles west in New Waverly, a depot along the recently constructed railroad line. Bishop DuBois had donated the land, and with lumber cut at William Schwontkoski's sawmill, the 20' by 32' chapel was completed in 1876. Father Victor Lisicki, another Resurrectionist, presided over construction of the small chapel, and it served St. Joseph's until 1896 when a new church

was erected. Although St. Joseph's was established as a mission of the Catholic Church in 1872, it gained in population in 1887 when the Polish church at Danville was closed and the congregation merged with the parishioners in New Waverly. When Father Theodore Jaron arrived in 1892, St. Joseph's status raised from mission to parish.¹⁰

Because of the church and parish, the immigrants enjoyed a highly integrated identity, not unlike that of the Old World. The religious calendar guided community life, allowing peasants to use Catholicism as a means of supplementing their natural and supernatural beliefs. In addition to Rogation processions each spring to bless the land and crops, the year was a round of religious observances. The Christmas season always came to an end with the traditional vigil dinner, known as *Wigila*. In January, the festivals of the Circumcision and the Epiphany were occasions for blessing parishioners' homes by the priest, a custom cherished by Poles because of Russian attempts to prohibit it in the Old World. In February they celebrated the feasts of Purification and St. Blaise, which included the blessing of the sacramentals as well as the blessing of throats to prevent illness. During Lent, they celebrated the feasts of St. Casimir and St. Joseph's, walked the stations of the cross, and had the *Gorzkie Zale*, a devotional expression of "bitter sorrow" over the death of Jesus Christ. In March or April came the Holy Week services and the *Swiecone*, or blessing of baskets, as well as the resurrection sunrise mass. During May the Holy Rosary sodalities in the parish held their Marian devotions with candlelight ceremonies. The priest would bless swimming areas in June for the feast of St. John the Baptist. For the Feast of the Assumption in August, the children in the parish would bring bouquets of flowers before the altar of Mary, and in September they would sing birthday celebrations to the Virgin Mother. In November, the parish celebrated All Saints and All Souls Day.¹¹

Just as important to the immigrants as the Old World religious calendar was the preservation of the Old World language. Like many other Catholic immigrant groups, the Poles believed that language and faith were intimately related, that any loss of the language among the community would inevitably lead to a loss of religion — perhaps even conversion to the Protestant values of the surrounding East Texas culture. They needed to hear the native language of their homeland in sermons, devotionals, and social activities, as well as from the mouths of their priests in the confessional. Between 1870 and 1900, a series of Polish priests, both Resurrectionists and seculars, including Fathers Orzechowski, Lisicki, Laski, Chalczarz, Polianski, Wylamowicz, Gaiduszen, Jaron, and Walter presided over St. Joseph's. In the 1890s, when officials at the Diocese of Galveston tried to place an Irish priest in charge of St. Joseph's a rebellion resulted and a number of prominent parishioners threatened to bolt the church and take the congregation into the newly-formed Polish National Catholic Church.¹²

The language and culture of the Old World was also preserved in the parochial school. During the first years after the migration, the colony at Old Waverly had been too small, too scattered, and too poor to support a parochial school, even though most parents felt it necessary to protect the language as well as insulate their children from the secular and Protestant values of the public schools. As the number of children increased in the colony and the economic means of their parents improved, however, the sense of need for a parish parochial school intensified. In 1896, when they built the new church at New Waverly, they converted the old church into a parochial school, and then built a new school in 1899 which more than one hundred students attended. The language of instruction was Polish and the curriculum concluded classes in Polish history, Polish culture, Polish grammar, and Roman Catholic moral teachings.¹³

Relatively isolated on their own land and socially isolated in the parish church, parochial school, and religious societies, the Poles maintained a closed family life, separating themselves from the surrounding Protestant society. More than anything else they viewed religious survival in family terms, realizing that once they married non-Poles they probably would lose the language, and once they married outside the faith they would probably lose their salvation. Like other ethnic Catholics in the United States they believed that ethnoreligious survival occurred in the marriage bed. Between 1865 and 1900, according to parish records and marriage certificates in Walker County, Texas, more than ninety-three percent of the members of St. Joseph's Parish married other Polish Catholics, and none of those who married non-Poles married Protestants.¹⁴

What set the Polish immigrants of St. Joseph's Parish in New Waverly apart from the mass of Poles in Chicago, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh was their rural isolation and capacity to reconstruct the ethnoreligious atmosphere of the Old World. To be sure, they could not remain isolated forever. The forces of modernization, deculturation, and assimilation — so powerful in American society — enveloped New Waverly in the twentieth century, destroyed the Old World language, altered Old World religious folkways, and enticed grandchildren and great-grandchildren out of the parish for the neighborhoods and territorial parishes of metropolitan Houston. But for three decades in the nineteenth century, there indeed was a "Little Poland" in East Texas.

NOTES

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¹³The best study of Czechs in Texas is William Phillip Hewitt's *The Czechs in Texas: A Study of the Immigration and the Development of Czech Ethnicity* (Austin, 1978). Also see Clinton Macham, ed., *The Czechs in Texas: A Symposium* (College Station, 1979).

²For the history of the Poles in Texas, see T. Lindsay Baker, *The First Polish Americans: Silesian Settlements in Texas* (College Station, 1979); Jacek Przygoda, *Texas Pioneers from Poland* (Waco, 1971); and Edward J. Dworaczyk, *The First Polish Colonies of America in Texas* (San Antonio, 1936).

³For the best study of the background of East European emigration, see Caroline Golab, *Immigrant Destinations* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 62-98.

⁴Edward J. Dworaczyk, *The Millenium History of Panna Maria, Texas, the Oldest Polish Settlement in America, 1854-1966* (Panna Maria, 1966).

⁵Edward J. Dworaczyk, *The First Polish Colonies*, pp. 157-158; "History of St. Joseph's Parish, New Waverly, Texas," unpublished manuscript, Diocese of Galveston-Houston, 1921-1922, pp. 1-2.

⁶W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York, 1918), p. 162.

⁷See the General Index to Walker County Deeds, Vols. I and II, Walker County Courthouse, Huntsville, Texas.

⁸For an excellent discussion of peasant folk religion, see W.I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant*, pp. 205-287.

⁹See Victor Greene, *For God and Country. The Rise of Polish and Lithuanian Ethnic Consciousness in America 1860-1910* (Madison, 1975), pp. 14-28.

¹⁰*The Texas Catholic Herald*, September 5, 1969; Diocese of Galveston-Houston, *St. Joseph's Parish Centennial* (New Waverly, 1969), n.p.

¹¹For the best description of the Polish religious calendar in America, see John Joseph Parot, *Polish Catholics in Chicago, 1850-1920. A Religious History* (Dekalb, 1981), p. 221.

¹²For a history of the Polish National Catholic Church, see Lawrence Orzell, "A Minority Within a Minority: The Polish National Catholic Church, 1896-1907," *Polish American Studies*, 36 (Spring, 1979), 5-32. Also see the open letter to Bishop N.A. Gallagher from parishioners at St. Joseph's Parish in 1896 demanding a Polish-speaking priest, Diocese of Galveston-Houston Chancery Archives.

¹³"History of St. Joseph's Parish, New Waverly, Texas," pp. 1-2.

¹⁴See marriage records, 1865-1900, Walker County Courthouse, Huntsville, Texas.