

*Polish Image\Defamation*

# Our Polish American Self Image: Responding to Its Detractors

**T**o Polish Americans who value our heritage, there is much about our ethnic and national identity and culture that we can rightfully take pride in.

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**The elevation of the “Polish Pope,” John Paul II, in 1978 changed the world and helped bring about the liberation of his homeland through the efforts of the Solidarity movement.**

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Indeed, it takes no great analytical gift to tick off the many positive features of our Polish heritage. These include a long list of significant historical figures, men and women who have contributed greatly to European and even to world culture, persons like Nicholas Copernicus, Fryderyk Chopin and Maria Skłodowska Curie, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, and Casimir Pulaski, and no fewer than four Nobel Prize winning writers—novelists Henryk Sienkiewicz and Władysław Reymont, and poets Czesław Miłosz, and most recently, Wisława Szymborska. Just in the past twenty years, we have experienced the heightened recognition and respect of our heritage that has come from our fellow Americans, who have marveled at the charismatic persona and wise actions of Pope John Paul II and the courage and idealism of the members of the Solidarity movement.

Less well known to our fellow Americans, but just as important in fact, are the qualities of our heritage that we Polish Americans like to believe have contributed to what is good about American life, namely our Polish American family values, respect for the rule of law, our work ethic, and our record of patriotic and military service, among other things. Many of us Polish Americans like to tell our fellow Americans about Poland’s historic traditions of constitutional government, religious toleration, and respect for the non Polish peoples who lived within the borders of the great and expansive state that

was Poland during its time of national greatness from the 14th to the 18th centuries.

We also like to recall the brave struggles for Polish independence after Poland was partitioned by its imperial neighbors in the years between 1795 and 1918. This heroic tradition is a big part of the memory of the Poland of the Second World War and the Solidarity movement too.

Yet regardless of our own appreciation of these aspects of these and many other positive aspects of our heritage, we cannot ignore a very basic reality. Despite all we know about who we are as Polish Americans, knowledge of our heritage and our culture is not an especially visible part of the American scene.

Yes, we Polish Americans constitute by far the largest ethnic group of east central European heritage—in 1990 the U.S. Census bureau estimated we numbered around 9.4 million members in all and the upcoming 2000 Census survey of national origins of Americans may find we are up to perhaps 10–11 million souls.

But compared to such national ancestry groups as the people of Germany, Irish, British, Italian, and French heritage, we are, in sheer numbers, far down the list. We are also far less numerous and visible than the major ethno-racial populations too, most significantly the peoples of African and of Hispanic heritage. Moreover, because relatively few individuals of Polish heritage have attained high celebrity status in the worlds of mass entertainment, television, radio, film, journalism, or the arts, our heritage is seldom noted in the mass media. Perhaps too, because the Polish American population of New York, though substantial, is still much smaller than those of Jews, Italians, Puerto Ricans, and Irish, we are practically invisible to that city’s enormous communications industry. The same is true in Los Angeles, where the predominant ethnic groups are Hispanic and Asian and the European origin Americans are all homogenized into the bland classification of “whites.”

There was a time, the 1960s and 1970s, when several Polish Americans rose to fame in American political life, most notably, Senator Edmund Muskie and Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski. Again, this time has passed and while Senators Barbara Mikulski and Frank Murkowski are often seen and heard on CSPAN, they

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are hardly household names and practically never appear on the Sunday morning public affairs talk shows.

The fact is that, while Polish Americans account for perhaps 4 percent of the entire U.S. population, ours is not a cultural heritage that is on the radar screen for most of our fellow Americans. Few associate Copernicus with anything Polish, most think that Chopin and Madame Curie were French, and practically none can even pronounce Kosciuszko's name, though everyone can say Kryzewski properly, as the famed Duke University coach insists they do! Ask a non-Polish friend who Pulaski was and be prepared for a disappointment—his and Kosciuszko's heroic exploits no longer even get into our high school textbooks. As for the Nobel laureates, Sienkiewicz and Reymont are unknown and hardly any Americans read poetry anyway. Americans often identify us with polka music, polish sausage, and more recently, paczki. Otherwise, we are practically invisible.

Of course, this is no particularly recent development. Indeed, there was even greater ignorance about Polish Americans and Poland in the decades before the 1960s, when very few members of our community ever got to college or achieved careers in the professions. Until recently, we were, with very few exceptions, a working class people, with origins overwhelmingly out of the Polish villages of an impoverished land under the control of foreign empires. Those empires had no interest in improving their educational or economic conditions.

Our forefathers who organized the Polish American fraternals, the clergymen who built the hundreds of Polish churches, and the businessmen who established the Polish press in America were undaunted. Indeed, they were driven to raise up the masses of immigrants to take greater advantage of the freedoms and opportunities they found in this country and they did achieve much within our Polish American Community, or Polonia. But in general, their accomplishments have been little known about, or celebrated, by the larger American society. The work of our own Polish American Congress, which we rightly recognize and celebrate, is unknown to most Americans. That the Polish American Congress was essential to NATO's expansion in 1999, is something of which even most well educated Polish Americans are ignorant.

Today, we Polish Americans are a people far different from our parents and grandparents of even a generation or two ago. In addition, our children and grandchildren are everywhere moving into positions of professional work and leadership in our country.

All of us know too that we continue to impart our core ethnic values of work, good citizenship, and commitment to family to our country. We know this from surveys about Polish Americans that social scientists conduct from time to time. These show us to be much more likely than the general population to own our own home, to have college educations, and to maintain enduring marriages in which the proper rearing of children is central.

In addition to these observations, however, there is another reality, that of the stereotyping of Polish Americans in American mass culture. It's as if it's not enough that our heritage is unknown to most of our fellow Americans, and to many Polish Americans too; there sometimes seems to be a permanent open season on disparaging our culture. Of course this did not begin

recently. We have a free society and freedom of speech; often this freedom has meant the freedom to poke fun and to stereotype Americans along ethnic and racial lines. Along the way, practically every group has been demeaned—Blacks, Latinos, Jews, Irish, Italians, Germans, Scandinavians, and of course, Polish Americans.

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### **“Polish Wedding” is a recent example of the “dumb polack” stereotype that is readily rented at your local Blockbuster store.**

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In our case the origins of our stereotyping are found, at least in the judgment of the scholar Thomas Napierkowski, in the novels and short stores of Nelson Algren, who focused heavily on the “low lifes” of Chicago's Division street Polonia for his alleged insights into the human condition. His work was bitterly criticized from the 1940s on by our fraternals, whose leaders saw nothing “humorous” or “socially insightful” in his work. Significantly, when Algren's works were portrayed in movies, for example, in “The Man with the Golden Arm,” the Polish references were so toned down that it was practically impossible to figure out just what kind of people the film was about. But Algren's stereotype of the low class and dimwitted polack carried forward. Especially in the 1970s, Algren-like characters were familiar figures on such TV comedies, as “Taxi,” “Laverne and Shirley,” and “Barney Miller.” And of course, these shows never stop being rerun to this day. A special word of mention goes here to the incredibly stupid and mean spirited film, “Polish Wedding,” a recent example of the “dumb polack” stereotype that is readily rented at your local Blockbuster store.

Given this situation, we should give thanks for “NYPD Blue's” Detective Andy Sipowicz, the street smart cop who repeatedly twists the law to fight crime, but down deep has a heart of gold. Along the way, he has become the most popular and one of the longest lived Polish American characters in TV history.

But Polish Americans have also suffered stereotyping in a second, more ominous way. Here the generalized charge is one that links Poles, and by extension, people of Polish heritage in America, to anti-semitism. Even more serious, because the American general public understands the destruction of the Jews in World War II as an example of the anti-semitic thinking of Hitler and the Nazis, it is not so long a leap for some to somehow connect the Polish people, who were in truth major victims of Nazism, with the crimes of the Nazis. Here are some numbers for us to consider—**6 million** Polish citizens died under Nazi rule, an incredible **20 percent** of the population. **Half** were Poles of Jewish heritage, **half** were gentiles. And Americans' knowledge of these figures is close to **zero**.

Beginning in the 1970s, even reputable scholars like Raul Hilberg began to make the distinction, erroneously, between the perpetrators of the Holocaust (the Germans), the victims of the Holocaust (the Jews), and the bystanders in the Holocaust (the Poles). When the American scholar of Polish descent Richard Lukas, published a book, “The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles

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under German Rule, 1939–1944,” which described the extent of the suffering of the Polish gentiles under the Nazis, he was roundly denounced in the American scholarly journal, *The Slavic Review*. The theme of Polish indifference and indirect if not direct, culpability for the Holocaust also runs through the widely discussed film, “Shoah.” Worse, a well reviewed American novel, later a film, “Sophie’s Choice,” went further and had the Polish woman imprisoned in a German concentration camp identified as the daughter of a Polish academic who dreamed up the final solution. And there have been, then and since, other films in this genre.

The central issue in discussions having to do with allegations of Polish anti-semitism is that the American public has become very sensitized to the subject of the Holocaust. Indeed today, to be labeled an anti-semitite is about the worst epithet that can be applied to an individual or a group of individuals in America. Once so labeled, or libeled, individuals or groups may find themselves ostracized or at least marginalized, by our country’s leading social institutions.

Here let us bear two things in mind: historically, the phenomenon of anti-semitism was universal, not particularly or solely Polish, before World War II. It was common in the United States, as is clear in the Academy Award winning movie, “Gentleman’s Agreement,” which appeared in 1947. It was virulent in many places, including, obviously in pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany, and in the supposedly socialist paradise of Stalin’s Soviet Union. Second, the word “anti-semitism” simply does not accurately describe Hitler’s Holocaust. The appropriate term for his policy was *genocide*, “the systematic, state directed effort to annihilate an entire people.” And as Dr. Lukas notes, the Poles were slated for this genocide too, like the Russians. This is also the conclusion of scholars Gerhard Weinberg, in his massive and very well received history of the Second World War, and Ian Kershaw, author of the recent and universally praised biography of Hitler.

The question thus before us may be stated in this way: how might Polish Americans deal with these two issues that face us in impeding our efforts to preserve our ethnic heritage for the next generation and to win greater respect for what our heritage is about? Three strategies immediately come to mind.

The first stresses dealing with the misrepresentations of the Polish heritage wherever and whenever they appear, usually in our mass media and in popular entertainment. A second emphasizes the building of coalitions with other ethnic communities so that together we might make a greater impression with the powers that be when we have a concern about our portrayal in our society. A third calls for the building of greater knowledge of our heritage through educational programs of various kinds.

In the PAC we have given a lot of attention to anti-bigotry activities in recent years. These are, I am sure, well intended in their aim. But I am of the opinion that such activities, while sometimes needed, are all too often hopeless enterprises. First of all, they are always reactive in character, responses to someone’s statement, an article in a newspaper or magazine, or some television broadcast or movie. They cannot undo what has been said or shown. Moreover, it takes an extraordinary amount of work to be effective in anti-bigotry activities. Sadly, once the job has been done in one place, another problem will pop up the very next day. Thus the work must begin all over. It’s like trying to stamp out an infinite number of worms in one’s yard. Eventually, one may have to ask, what’s the use?

A second strategy makes more sense. There are other people, like the Italian Americans, who share with us certain similar sensitivities about their unfair depiction. If we could build an active dialog with them, we might be able to exert some greater pressure on the companies that promote the most seriously biased material that is hurtful to our communities. We might even win a more sympathetic ear in the general public, so long as we avoid talk about censorship or self-censorship. That sort of idea will always be rejected. Of course, we have many other potential allies in the responsible effort to reach out to win public support for our concerns. But coalition-building takes time and lots of patience. Like Krakow, coalitions aren’t built in a single day.

There is a third strategy, the hardest one to do, but in my judgment the one with the greatest potential for long term success. It involves the expansion of our efforts to promote the development of knowledge about the history, culture, current experience, and achievements of the Polish people, and the story of the Polish emigration to America and its descendants. This effort can proceed in a variety of diverse directions, in educational programs at the high school and college level, in the form of adult education and public lectures, in the creation and dissemination of television videos, in the support of Polish studies centers in various parts of our country, in promoting educationally oriented travel to Poland, and in other ways besides. This work isn’t easy. It takes money and lots of time. It requires the talents of persuasion and public relations. But it can pay great dividends in gradually creating a genuinely informed American public whose members will reject in principle the denigration of our heritage—because they know better.

Are we up to this task?

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