

Book Review: Henry Radecki, *Ethnic Organizational Dynamics: The Polish Group in Canada* (Waterloo, Laurier University Press, 1979).

How does one chronicle the historical movement by an immigrant people from their “homeland” to a new “world”? How does one describe the transformation in native culture which is part and parcel of that move, a transformation reflecting a division in personal existence, the outcome of a people’s larger struggle to be free? What are the specific activities voluntarily undertaken by immigrant people which contribute to establishment and maintenance of a cultural milieu that will continue the values and meaning often left behind?

Answers to these questions are clearly apparent in the author’s historically comprehensive, factual, well-documented study on the role of voluntary organizations in the maintenance of Polish culture by immigrants and their descendants in Canada. Structural characteristics of the group and organizational dynamics are examined in relation to establishment and maintenance of Polish culture, a distinctive piece of Canada’s “cultural mosaic.” Findings shed new light on a topic which has, for lack of prior research, been in unique need of deeper exploration.

The author’s presentation of factual information gains a unique vantage point for the reader from which to view the organizational dynamics of societal processes which maintain the lifeblood of a people, its culture. Maintenance of culture ensures continuation of a distinct, vital and viable community life, a unilateral set of common values steeped in ethnocultural foundations which will propagate trans-generational renewal of tradition to guide the meaning of daily life. Functional characteristics of Polish voluntary organizations serve the needs of the people, in turn, regulating the process of their own development, flux and change. Sociologically, their significance depicts the dynamics involved in achievement of cultural autonomy by the Polish immigrants and their descendants, becoming a voice in their new land. Needs and values guiding personal life are acknowledged, fulfilled and propagated across generations ... “organizational settings facilitated interactions and relationships among individuals sharing the same cultural heritage and through this process, reinforced their self-identity as Poles” (p. 228).

The work is presented in such a manner as to serve a dual purpose: 1) To portray and analyze establishment and later developments of Polish voluntary organizational structures within the historical framework; 2) To focus on voluntary organizational structures and their dynamics during a specific period of time (1973) in a limited geographical area (Metropolitan Toronto). Inclusion of historical sociocultural development allows the full contextualization of specific, field research data collected from all 146 Polish voluntary organizations existing in Toronto in 1973. Historical factors

governing immigration provide validity and significance to information gathered via questionnaire and structured interviews with 51 officers, members and non-members of the 146 groups. Factors affecting “phases” of Polish immigration to Canada throughout Polish/Canadian history chronicle events leading to establishment and development, to “solidification, growth and expansion” (p. 66) of Polish culture in Canada from its time of origination, 1860. By 1940, Toronto had become and remains the “Capital of the Polish people in Canada,” noting the movement of earlier Polish immigrants from the west of Canada to eastern urban centers. Organizational dynamics of the groups have undergone change and met conflict within their own membership, shifting the aims and goals to meet the needs of present members. Since one primary aim of the group has been to maintain cultural distinctiveness not just within the foreign-born immigrants but within the Canadian-born population, the older leaders who are steeped in traditions of their homeland are in conflict with their younger descendants. Internal stress is centered around the changing values represented by the Canadian-born descendant. The Polish Group in Canada has been transformed from one of predominately foreign-born to one with two-thirds of its members born in Canada. Continued propagation of its oldest traditions, religious practices, festivals, important national holidays and maintenance of their native tongue, as their primary language is threatened. Polish schools, publications and churches, traditional vehicles serving these purposes have sharply declined.

Continuation of these organizations requires recruitment of new members. Three alternatives for the future are presented: 1) The groups will change to attract new members by serving the needs of Canadian-born Poles (which also means a shift in the expectations of foreign-born members); 2) The organizations will be duplicated and replaced by new ones which exclusively serve the needs and values of Canadian-borns; 3) The nature of the voluntary organizations will change into Canadian voluntary structures, no longer focusing on the needs and values of Polish people specifically but serving all Canadians (pp. 230-232). Thus, the guiding goals of their formation, maintenance of “cultural distinctiveness,” are presently undergoing a crisis, threatened by the acculturation and assimilation of a distinct people, the Poles, into Canadian-Poles.

Options for future voluntary participation in ethnic organizations by the Polish Group in Canada appear to be in the throes of self-determination by its own people. A choice is required, which option to follow into the future. Only two of the three options presented by the author’s precise analysis will continue preservation of cultural distinctiveness of the Polish Group. Vitality of the membership has, in the past, been directly related to the influx and eventual dispersion of Polish immigrants throughout the past 113 (now 120) years. New methods for re-vitalizing the lifeblood of the Group are now in need since immigration laws for both countries have

stabilized for the time being. Very few immigrants arrive in Canada now, international re-location being regulated by the political policies of both countries.

Becoming a political factor in its own right, vying with the two “founding” cultures, the French and British, continued affiliation of Polish organizations into legal self-governing bodies evidence the tremendous advancement made by Polish immigrants and their descendants. Educational achievement, participation in professional positions the development of sharp business acumen, all reflect the characteristics of the Polish population in Canada today. They have been met in their living environment by a complementary official policy of “multiculturalism” by the Canadian government whose aim and purpose was maintenance of the multicultural nature of its population. As a now active “piece” of Canada’s multicultural mosaic, the Polish Group in Canada has emerged into a recognizable structure of cultural heritage contributing to the overall picture of this new landscape.

The author’s deep insights into innerworkings of voluntary Polish organizations, gleaned by careful analysis, are crucial to the meaning of the situation currently faced by an immigrant group. Although compared with literature available on various immigrant groups in other countries, the function of voluntary organizations offers opportunities for expression of what is unique to a particular cultural heritage. Findings show that few regularities between immigrant groups exist (pp. 233-234). Unique to the study is the author’s ability to coordinate historical data with specific, personal data gathered from leaders and participants alike. Methodologically, the author’s approach allows a grasp of the meaning of “trends” in history as they are personally experienced and given expression in several places by participants, in their own words.

The informative, concise and thorough presentation of historical factors involved in the initial beginning of immigration and its continued developments through major change in the countries of each land, as well as the world at large (World War II in particular), provides a clear picture of the many hardships encountered. Those who first began to arrive in Canada lacked personal “resources”, monies, skills, insurance coverage, fraternal contact, opportunities to practice familiar religious traditions unique to Polish culture, language barriers, distribution of information in native language, schools, lack of common holidays, festivals, etc. The slow change in the Polish situation provided by development of voluntary organizations and given financial assistance by Canada’s official adoption of a multicultural policy facilitated the growth and expansion of what the Polish people had done to help themselves.

The author's presentation of human factors, implicit as well as explicit, galvanize the factual data into what amounts to the story of an immigrant people who have been torn not only by the "loss" of their "homeland" but by the conflict introduced in history, the denial of one's basic right to a homeland by those who now occupy it and by a government still in exile.

The lucid presentation of a myriad of data reveals the author's "interior vision" and personal investment in the topic. As a native of Poland, whose parents were active participants in these voluntary organizations, now on the faculty at Laurentian University, the author's depth of scholarly interest, moved by an existential desire to "know" one's own beginnings, as well as to bear the responsibility for the future propagation of Polish culture, gives a new dimension to scholarly work. As the story of an immigrant people's sacrifice made to be free, it presents a picture all should see. As an exercise in academic sociological research, it is a guidebook for high-spirited adventure into the previously unknown.

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