



Archival Sources for the Study

of Polish Canadians

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BASED ON THE MYRON MOMRYK'S *ARCHIVAL SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF POLISH CANADIANS*; PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA, OTTAWA 1987

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BRIEF SURVEY OF THE POLISH CANADIAN ARCHIVAL HERITAGE IN CANADA

The record of the Polish experience in North America has its origins at the beginning of the European exploration of the New World. Names suggesting Polish origins are found in several American colonial documents. In the United States, there are also substantial records of individual Poles who have played a prominent role throughout American history. In Canada, among the earliest references are the names of some soldiers that served in the de Meuron and de Watteville regiments during the War of 1812 which suggest Polish origins. Some of these soldiers later participated in Lord Selkirk's colonization projects in what is now Manitoba but unfortunately they did not leave behind any records of their activities.

During the nineteenth century, Poland experienced a turbulent historical evolution punctuated by wars and uprisings in attempts to free Poland from foreign occupation and reunite the partitioned lands. Each uprising and insurrection produced a wave of Polish political exiles that sought refuge in western Europe and the United States. A few of these individuals eventually found refuge in Canada.

One of the more prominent exiles was Sir Casimir Gzowski who fled Poland after the collapse of the 1830-1831 insurrection. In a few cases such as that of Sir Casimir Gzowski, archival documents have provided some information of their careers and activities; however, records regarding many of the first Poles in Canada have not survived.

In 1858, families from the Kashub region of northern Poland settled in the Madawaska River Valley region of Ontario. More settlers followed and by the 1880s there was a large Polish

community that has continued to the present day. A Roman Catholic parish was founded in 1872, and records of this and other parishes form a treasured part of the Polish Canadian archival heritage. By 1872, 52 Polish families had settled in Berlin (now Kitchener) and during the 1870s some Polish immigrants settled in the Toronto area. Polish workers from Europe and the United States were attracted to Canada by the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s. However, census records do not show the Poles as a separate group. In 1901, the Poles were listed separately for the first time and there were 6,285 recorded then. With the opening of the Canadian West the largest wave of Polish immigration began. By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, over 100,000 Poles entered Canada. Some of these immigrants continued their journey to the United States to join the large Polish communities in northern industrial centres.

This wave consisted mainly of peasants from Galicia and most of them settled on the prairies where they claimed homesteads. Among these immigrants were some agricultural and industrial workers who hoped to make their fortune in Canada and then return to Poland. These workers settled in the industrial cities of eastern Canada where the small developing Polish communities assisted the new immigrants in adjusting to Canadian life. Gradually Polish stores, boarding houses, mutual aid societies and other formal and informal associations developed and became the first building blocks of the organized Polish community in Canada.

The Roman Catholic Church has played a historic role in the defense and maintenance of Polish culture in Poland and this strong union between religion and culture has continued to dominate Polish community life in Canada. The large majority of Polish immigrants supported the various social and cultural institutions sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. ..The Catholic Weekly was one of the two most important Polish newspapers during this period. The other newspaper, Czas (Time), dealt with secular issues and assisted Poles in Canada to adjust to Canadian life.

World War I had a profound effect on the Polish community in Canada. The large wave of immigration ceased. The Polish community organized to assist the Canadian war effort and Polish volunteers served in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces. Also, Polish soldiers were trained in Canada for the new Polish Army being formed on the Western Front in France.

After the collapse of the Imperial Russian, Imperial German and Austro- Hungarian Empires, Polish Canadians supported the establishment of the independent Polish Republic on November 11, 1918. Some Polish Canadians served in the Polish Armed Forces, defeating the attempts of hostile neighbours to invade the territory of the new state.

The new Polish government was faced with numerous problems of organization and consolidation. These problems were compounded by the need for constant vigilance against hostile neighbours. It was in this climate of insecurity and international tension that the second large wave of immigrants came from Poland to Canada. Immigrants came from overpopulated areas of Poland and contained a large percentage of minority groups.

Between 1919 and 1931, approximately 52,000 Poles entered Canada. Many of these immigrants settled in industrial centres throughout Canada. Some of these immigrants

