

POLES IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

Address delivered before the Chautauqua County Historical Society at Dunkirk, N.Y., June 12, 1917, by Francis S. Stegelski of Dunkirk, N.Y.

Andrew Carnage at a conference on immigration in New York City, some years ago, declared that it is only a question of at how recent a date has the immigrant or his forefathers come into this country. It was a broad statement made by that well known immigrant-foreigner and yet this dictum was perfectly reasonable, if the stranger in our midst is of but yesterday, his descendents two or three centuries hence, can, with as great pride, point to him as the descendents of the Mayflower, immigrants point today to their progenitors, for, notwithstanding the laws passed by Congress on the restriction of immigration, we must admit that the entire country today is settled by immigrants or descendents of immigrants, of whom the Poles form a goodly portion.

We know that there has been in the past opposition to permitting immigration of some particular nation or nations. For instance, we know from history, that in 1840 there was quite a discussion as to whether or not the Irish, and German should be permitted to come to this country unrestricted. After considerable discussion, it was thought that they might become "desirable citizens" and the ban was raised against them.

In 1860, the same process of argument was raised against the Scandinavian, Norwegians, Swedes and Danes, that they would lower wages in this country, and might be the means of putting the country in financial straits but the ban has been raised against them.

Just before the war, we heard the outcry by the same class of objectors, who, perhaps, honestly believe that immigration should be stopped or restricted from the central or Southern countries of Europe and voices were raised particularly against the Slavs, the Italians, and the Russian Jews, claiming that they are certainly undesirable, and the cry of "America for Americans" was heard quite loudly throughout the land.

Let us consider, however, who is an American here and who, using the definition of the restrictionists would be desirable citizens. In my humble opinion the question is, "how good a citizen is he?", and "how does he add to the general welfare of the Country, by his presence here?" However, it is not my intention here to discuss immigration in general, but to confine myself to the Poles in America and, it is but proper that I should in a few words glean the history of their country.

The Geographer, Ptolemy, who lived in the second century of the Christian Era, mentioned the "Bulance" who were the forefathers of the Poles of today.

In 522, Jordannes, speaks of the Slavs inhabiting the banks of the Vistula and tradition says "Lechs", another name for Poles began to form villages and colonies and had princes and kings at that time. When Alfred the Great, Edward the Confessor and William the Conqueror sat on

the throne of England, Poland had a history of centuries. When the Magna Charta, adopted in 1215, became that important instrument in government of the English people, Poland's territory extended already for a hundred and thousand square miles. In 1492, when Columbus discovered this continent, Poland was in a most prosperous condition and additional luster was cast upon her by the genius of the great Copernicus, the Geographer of Heaven. When New York was settled by the Dutch in 1641, Poland at that time was at the height of her glory.

In 1640, when that great educational institution, Harvard University was founded, Poland already had the University of Krakaw founded almost three centuries before.

When John III, Sobieski in 1683 was defending the civilization of Europe against the cohorts of Mohammadism and saving Christianity on the continent, William Penn was just colonizing Pennsylvania.

Four years before the Declaration of Independence, in 1776, Poland had already undergone the first partition, this crime being perpetrated in 1772 by the neighboring countries of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. When George Washington in 1789 became the first president, Poland met in that great four year diet which resulted in the Polish constitution without fear of contradiction, I can declare as being the most progressive had by any of the nations of Europe at that time, except, perhaps England and was built on the lines of the constitution of Great Britain and our own United States.

The great insurrection of the Poles under the leadership of the hero of two worlds, Thadeusz Koszciusko and the bloody battles and victories of the Russians cohorts, the resulting second partition in 1794, all took place before George Washington retired as president of this country, and Poland, after almost 13 centuries of tradition and history, had been politically absorbed in 1795, though divided by three neighboring nations, refused to be denationalized but has grown stronger and stronger in every direction, in the number of people in the progress of science, in art and literature.

There is a startling resemblance between Poland and the United States. We, here assembled are citizens of a young, powerful, active country. Today, we are the bulwarks of freedom, Poland was strong, energetic, restless, ever-ready to fight the battles of the weak. Both of these countries, brave and generous to a fault, both a confederation of states. This country uniting under one flag, bound by one constitution, united by one executive representative body in Washington. Poland, since 1569, a confederation of three great nations, Poland, Lithuania and Ruthenia, this being the first voluntary confederation of independent powers in Europe: Poland was and United States is directed by an elective government: Both religious but tolerant to all creeds, both loving liberty better than life. There is a strong bond of friendship between the two countries, Poland, stricken off the map of Europe, is its battlefield today and today the great United States is looked upon by the nations of the world as Bulwark of all freedom, of all civilization and all progress as Poland was in ancient times. Poland for centuries pressed backwards the barbarous tribes from the East who came westward to the banks of the Beister.

In Europe the majority of Poles are engaged in agriculture. Here, in America they have started many small colonies in agricultural districts, they have taken up farms, abandoned by Americans and have coaxed out of them a good living, and great wastes of but a short time ago, have become fields of plenty under their hands.

The Poles have come to this country over two and one-half centuries ago. The well-known Jesuit author, Father Conway, in his "Catholic Education in the United States" writes that "as early as 1659 the Dutch colonists of Manhattan Island hired a Polish School Master for the education of the youth of the community of the higher schools.

The first Polish Parish was organized by Rev. Dymitir Augustine Galiczyn in 1795 in Bohemia Manor Maryland. The first Polish Jesuits came in 1808 at the request of Bishop Carroll of Maryland.

In 1831, we have reports of many of the Polish nobility, who, after the insurrection of 1830 and 31 in Poland, escaped to England and later to America and those that came to this country at that time were the flower of Polish intelligence, patriots, scientists and educators.

In and after 1846 during another insurrection in Poland, there was quite a rush of Polish exiles to this country but the most of them came after the last Polish insurrection in 1863. The first large Polish colonies were organized in Texas and, in 1856, we see the foundation of the towns of "Panna Maria" and "Czestohowa". These are at present in a flourishing condition. In 1856 the town of Polonia, Wisconsin, was founded by the Poles and in 1857 they founded Parisville,

Mich., near Detroit. The greatest tide, however, of Polish immigration set in 1880, and since that time every state in the Union has Poles within its boundaries. In the state of New York for instance, we see great Polish population in every city reached by any of the great railroad trunk lines as witness Buffalo, Batavia, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, Herkimer, Amsterdam, Schenectady, Troy, Cohoes, Albany, Hudson, Poughkeepsie, Yonkers, New York City, Salamanca, Olean, Elmira, Niagara Falls, Tonawanda and Dunkirk. It is sufficient to mention but these few. In fact, there is not a state in the Union from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the Canadian boundary, to the Gulf of Mexico which has not American citizens of Polish extraction, living within their confines. In the State of New York there are over 600,000 Poles.

What have these people done? They came here as poor as the proverbial church mouse, as poor as one can imagine an immigrant to be. They were not only poor, but were without knowledge of the language, customs, and traditions of their new country but they have desired to become good citizens. They brought healthy and strong bodies and minds uncorrupted, untainted in any way. Ninety-nine percent of them were peasants, who, in their own country, worked hard and honestly from dawn to dusk and are eager to do the same here. Most of the Poles were located in the middle states and more than one-third of them are situated on farms as owners and laborers. In 1901, Rev. Father Kruszka of Milwaukee, made a most extensive and thorough study of the Poles in his history of the Poles in America. He estimated that they owned approximately 5,600,000 acres of farm land and in city property more than three billion dollars in value. From the start they sought for the ownership of their little homes. As a rule, the Poles are industrious, thrifty, honest and cautious and seldom take long chances. By building their own homes, they simply prove their sagacity and ability to rise from the lowest financial stratum and from a poor

subsistence to the higher scale of economic conditions. In building their little homes they have laid the surest foundations of their progress. The number of pieces of Polish-owned property in our City of Dunkirk, is about 500 and the mortgages on these are small and they are always paid up. It is almost an unknown event for a foreclosure proceeding to be recorded against a piece of Polish property.

So much for their property, but see their business development. The Poles, as I have said before are agricultural people. Poland never was a commercial country. It is only recently that the Polish people have taken to business and commercial enterprises of any magnitude.

They also show their thrift in other directions. In the four Savings Bank in the City of Buffalo, figures show that the Poles have more than 5 million dollars on deposit and yet all this wealth amounting to millions and millions of dollars was made out of starvation wages.

Not only have the Poles built their homes and churches out of these wages, but in the 100 and more Polish colonies in the cities, towns and hamlets of the country, there are Polish schools, colleges and seminaries, orphan asylums, homes for the aged and poor, libraries etc. In other words, they have every thing that is part and parcel of a civilized and up-to-date people.

There is not a township within Chautauqua County but what has some Polish Families upon its farms, but the majority of the Poles in Chautauqua County reside in the City of Dunkirk. The first Polish Family settled in Dunkirk in 1854. In 1873 the first Polish church was built. At that time there were about 40 Polish Families. Today there are within the City of Dunkirk over 6000

Poles or about a third of the population of the city. Most of them residing in the eastern part of the city. About 80% of them own their own homes. There are two Polish churches and two Polish schools and as I have stated before, the Poles in Dunkirk as well as in the country have come here to stay and are a most valuable asset to this country. They have their shortcomings; they have their faults, but I can assure you, that the Poles did not come to this country to reap the fruits from the labors of others, but to add their might to the general welfare of the country by honest work, the acquirement of homes, the payment of their share of taxes and carrying their part of the burdens of the American Nation.

The Poles did not come to this country to become a liability but an asset in every community in which they settled. They love America because America gave them a safe harbor after an exile from their own unhappy land. The Polish people have done and will continue to do all in their power to make this country with the aid of other law abiding and patriotic Americans of foreign descent, the grandest, the best, the holiest of any land the sun has ever shown upon.

admiration. It was a new thing then to beautify homes with flowers and shrubbery and the example of the Risleys had great effect in developing the beauty of our village.

The Risley Brother also set out many of the trees which now adorn our village parks.

When Hezekiah Barker donated the land for those parks, it was full of stumps of the primeval forest trees. Tradition has it that those stumps were removed by our Justices of the Peace sentencing every man seen uproariously drunk in a public place to dig a stump out of the park. This was provided for by village ordinance. With nine distilleries in the town of Pomfret and whisky selling over the bar at three cents a drink it did not take long to find enough drunks to dig out the last stump.

And when the three Risley Brothers had our skilled carriage makers of those days make them each a fine standing top carriage and drawn by well groomed horses with silver plated harness they drove in procession to church every Sunday morning, the sight filled my boyhood's eye with feelings akin to awe. I would not be more thrilled now at seeing the Lord Mayor's annual pageant in London.

But alas, the Risleys are all gone. Not a descendent remains in Fredonia. Of their numerous children only one survives, a daughter of Mr. Levi Risley, Mrs. Susan Risley Weare of Los Angeles, California. Sic Transit Gloria Mundi. So passes the Glory of the World.