

SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE POLISH PEASANT EMIGRATION AND IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES FROM 1870 TO 1914

THE ROYAL REPUBLIC AND COMMONWEALTH OF POLAND IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Without going into detail about the causes of the fall of Poland in the Eighteenth Century, a brief outline of the history of the country before, during and after that period helps to place the mass emigration of Poles from Europe and the immigration to America in an understandable historical context.

After the death of the last king of the Jagiellonian dynasty, Zygmunt II August, in 1572, and lasting until 1795, Poland was a Royal Republic. The nobility elected the king and determined much of the course of the nation by means of the laws and policies enacted by the Diet. Poland became a “Republic of Nobles” governed by constitutional laws. Although this was a very liberal political experiment in Europe at that time, the peasantry had no share in the determination of the government of the nation. During this period Poland remained free of the worst of the religious turmoil which so often preoccupied much of Europe. Although the vast majority of Poles were and are Roman Catholic, a spirit of religious tolerance held sway in the Royal Republic. Poland operated on the principle that none shall be persecuted or punished because of differences in faith. This attitude was aptly expressed by King Zygmunt August when he said: “I am king of the people, not the judge of their consciences.” This spirit attracted a large number of refugees from religious persecution during the history of Poland before the Partitions: Jews in the Thirteenth Century, Hussites in the Fifteenth, Mennonites from Holland in the Sixteenth, and Catholics from England and Scotland during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries.

The marriage of Jadwiga, the last ruler of the Piast dynasty, to Jogaila (Władysław Jagiello), the Grand Duke of Lithuania, in 1386 began a personal union of Poland and Lithuania which continued through the rulers of the Jagiellonian dynasty. Since the last ruler of this dynasty, Zygmunt August, had no sons or daughters to inherit the throne, he consolidated the links between Poland and Lithuania on a legal not personal basis with the drafting of the Union of Lublin in 1569. Beginning in 1569 after the formal union of Poland and Lithuania with a common diet, monarch and monetary system, Poland became not only a royal republic, but also a commonwealth made up of territories populated by people of various ethnic groups. The constitutional laws of Poland based on liberty and on the consent of the nation were attractive to non-ethnic Poles who formed this commonwealth. At its greatest extent the Commonwealth of Poland extended from the Baltic in the North to the Black Sea in the South. The diversity of the Commonwealth of Poland, a vast territory ruled by an elected monarch and governed by the “Republic of

Nobles,” is reflected in the recognition of six official languages (Polish, Latin, Ruthenian, German, Armenian and Hebrew) for use in the territories under Polish control.

At the beginning of the Eighteenth Century the Commonwealth of Poland still included a large territory and a population which included many non-ethnic Poles. At this time the Commonwealth still included Lithuania, parts of Livonia, White Russia, Little Russia and Ukraine. However, the Royal Polish Republic also suffered from various internal problems and weaknesses. Thus, during the final quarter of the century the territory of a weak Poland was partitioned between the neighboring countries of Russia, Prussia and Austria. In the First Partition in 1772 each of these countries took parts of Polish territory. In an attempt to solve the internal problems and weaknesses which plagued the Royal Republic and to renew and strengthen the State, Poland adopted a new Constitution on May 3, 1791, which was the second written constitution in the history of the world, the oldest being the US Constitution. In many ways this Constitution was very similar to the recently adopted United States Constitution. Unfortunately, before the new Constitution had time to bear fruit, Poland’s neighbors again violated the territorial integrity of the Royal Republic. In the Second Partition of 1793 only Russia and Prussia seized Polish lands. In the Final Partition of 1795 King Stanislaw August Poniatowski, who had played an important role in the formulation of the Constitution of 1791, was forced to abdicate and all three neighbors again divided what territory remained under Polish control and Poland ceased to exist as a political entity.

PARTITIONED POLAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY UNTIL WORLD WAR I

After the Third Partition, most of Western Poland (including the area which later would be part of Russian Poland) was under German control. This situation lasted until the establishment of the Duchy of Warsaw during the Napoleonic Wars when Napoleon Bonaparte gained control of that area from Prussia. As a result of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the major powers of Europe realigned the borders of the states of Europe. This resulted in the formation of the Congress Kingdom of Poland, a small satellite state under Russian control. The partitioning states continued to maintain their control over the remaining lands seized in the three partitions. The control of the former Polish territories determined by the Congress of Vienna continued until the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. It was only then, and largely due to the insistence of the American President Woodrow Wilson, that an independent Poland returned to the map of Europe.

From 1815 until the end of World War I conditions in the partitioned sections varied with the times and the will of the powers in control of each area. Insurrections in 1830 and again in 1863 in Russian Poland and rebellions in 1846 and 1848 in Prussian and Austrian Poland did not bring about any success in the liberation of Poland from foreign control. However, these insurrections did bring about more repressive policies and the emigration of a large number of Polish intellectuals and patriots who were the leaders of the insurrections. The peasants, however, still did not consider emigration necessary or desirable.

Polish society at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century contained several classes: the gentry, the clergy, the burgers and the peasants. Poland was still predominately a rural country with few large towns and cities. In rural Poland the gentry owned most of the land and the majority of the peasants were serfs bound by the old feudal system. During the Nineteenth Century Polish peasants were emancipated from their feudal obligations—in 1807 in German Poland, in 1848 in Austrian Poland, and in 1864 in Russian Poland. A redistribution of land followed the emancipation of the peasants. However, the land holdings of the majority of the peasants were very small, although a middle class of peasants with somewhat larger holdings of land began to emerge. This new freedom of the peasants resulted in a hunger for land which could not be satisfied in the various areas of partitioned Poland. This desire for land was an important factor which led to an emigration from Poland and resulted in increased immigration of Polish peasants to Western Europe and the Americas, especially to the United States.

During the course of the Nineteenth Century economic and social change as a result of the Industrial Revolution first affected Western Europe and the United States and later began to gradually change Poland. In the mid 1880's a decline in world grain prices changed the nature of Polish peasant life. For the first time in four centuries central Poland ceased to be a major exporter of grain to western Europe. This dramatically changed the Polish economy. Poland became a supplier of textiles to the rest of the Russian Empire and a major supplier of immigrants to North America and other parts of the world. The spread of industrialization also brought about a switch to wage labor for the peasants of Poland. The land reform after the emancipation of the peasants in what had been known as the Congress Kingdom did not decrease the number of landless peasants, but had the opposite effect. The number of landless peasants actually increased from 220,000 in 1870 to 849,000 in 1891.

THE POLISH PEASANT EMIGRATION 1870 TO 1920

The 1870's and 1880's saw the largest segment of Poles coming to America from the Province of Posen in German Poland. Bismark's policy of *Kulturkampf* which targeted German Catholics also included an aggressive policy for the replacement of Polish peasants in the Province of Posen with German colonists together with an attempt to strip the Poles of their culture. Polish farm workers often had great difficulty in obtaining full-time work in German Poland. Thus there existed a dual motivation for this first great wave of peasant emigration: to seek freedom from the oppressive policies of the German Empire and to find the means to earn a decent living. This emigration was said to be "*za chlebem*" ("for bread"). After 1868, the Russian government implemented more repressive policies and increased the pressure to destroy Polish culture by making Russian the official language in the Kingdom. By the 1890's emigration from German Poland began to slow down and the largest source of emigrants switched first to Russian Poland and finally to Galicia in Austrian Poland. Emigrants from each of the areas of Partitioned Poland all shared the common motivation of searching for better opportunities for living—opportunities which were lacking in the homeland. However, there also existed

considerable differences in how emigration and immigration to America took place and in the ways that immigrants from each Partition viewed their fellow immigrants from the other Partitions. Those from the German Partition tended to leave Poland for America as family units. During the period from 1870 to 1890 almost the entire population of some villages came to America. Often, families from an area in Poland settled together in the same area in America. In contrast, the majority of those from the Russian (The Kingdom of Poland) and Austrian Partitions came as single men or the husband/father came alone and sent for his wife and children after he had earned enough in America to pay for their passage. Those from the German Partition tended to be more educated than those from the other Partitions. Since they were the first to arrive in America they tended to have already organized parishes and fraternal and social groups and tended to assume leadership roles in those organizations. This often tended to create a certain degree of animosity between them and later immigrants from the other areas of Poland.

The journey from Poland to America was not easy. The first difficulty Poles from Russian and Austrian Poland faced was crossing the border into German Poland in order to reach one of the ports of embarkation. The German government set up border check points where the emigrants faced a number of hurdles including an inspection of papers and a medical examination. Many crossed through the border control stations, but many chose to avoid the official crossing points for various reasons and often employed “guides” to bring them across the border into German Poland. Once across the border, a long journey awaited the emigrants. They had to cross Germany to one of the major port cities: Bremen, Hamburg, Antwerp, Rotterdam, etc. Often this journey involved a long and frequently confusing train trip on several rail lines.

Upon arrival at the port of embarkation, the emigrants faced another medical examination, questions about their destination, proof of valid tickets, amount of money on hand, etc. The trip across the ocean generally lasted from five to six weeks in a sailing ship and about two weeks in a steamship. The steerage level of the ships was crowded and generally uncomfortable and unsanitary. Seasickness was a problem for many who had never been on a ship. Upon arrival in the United States, the immigrants underwent another examination which involved a medical examination, a determination of mental fitness and a social screening in which the immigrant was questioned in order to determine if he was an anarchist, bigamist, pauper, criminal, etc. After being admitted to the United States, the immigrants faced a long and often confusing journey from the port of arrival to their final destination.