

Polish Immigrant Women in Early 20th Century Connecticut

An honors thesis for the Department of History

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Tufts University, April 27th, 2021

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my wholehearted thanks to my thesis advisor, Professor Drachman. Professor Drachman, and her expertise in women's history in America, gave me the support and opportunity to take my passion for understanding my family's history and in turn create this thesis. I would not have been able to even begin this thesis, let alone write it, without her guidance, criticisms, and expertise. I am extremely honored to have been able to work under and learn from Professor Drachman in the seminal research experience of my time as an undergraduate at Tufts University. I would also like to thank Professor Rice, for stepping in to be my second committee member at the last minute, and for the valuable skills I gained in his research seminar.

Additionally, I would like to thank Micah Saxton, the Research Librarian for the Humanities at Tisch Library at Tufts University, for taking the time to help me utilize Tufts University's resources and helping to guide me to necessary resources for my thesis. I would also like to thank Ewa Wolynska, the Special Collections Librarian and Archivist of the Connecticut Polish American Archive at the Elihu Burritt Library at Central Connecticut State University, for generously taking the time to find transcripts of interviews and to discuss the time period and Polish American history with me.

Finally, I would like to thank the family that made it possible for me to write this thesis. My mother, Melissa Mazan, and my aunt, Pamela Mazan Payson, for remembering and cataloguing dates and events, as well as helping to ensure that my grandfather answered my never-ending questions. My great-aunt, Marianne Mazan, for being an objective and clear family historian. And finally, my grandfather and namesake, Raymond Mazan, for instilling in me a passion for storytelling through his brilliant memories and stories of his childhood.

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Introduction

The Story of Helena Tokarz Mazan

On the morning of May 11th, 1909, twenty-year-old Helena Tokarz, later Helena Mazan, daughter of Izydor Tokarz and Maria Cebula Tokarz, stepped off the new German-built ship Kronprinzessin Cecilie, and onto American soil. It was a fair spring day with a light breeze, and Helena was about to begin her new life. Helena's story reveals much about the lives of young Polish women who immigrated to the United States in the early 20th Century. Helena was typical in her immigration journey and in her experiences as a wife and mother in the Polish American community. At the same time, Helena was an unusual woman with a life that deviated from the norm. This thesis tells Helena's story, and seeks to examine the ways that Helena and other Polish immigrant women of her generation settled and created lives for themselves in Connecticut, and thus helped to create an American culture and society distinctly different to the one that they had entered. While doing this, the women also worked towards the assimilation of their children, helping to create a dualistic identity for the first generation for Polish Americans.

Helena's journey had begun in her hometown of Niedzwiada, Galicia, in what is today southeastern Poland, to Bremen, Germany, where she boarded the ship that brought her to America.¹ Helena's life in the small Polish village of Galicia had been grueling. Filled with what she called the "misery" of hands broken from work and a perpetual state of starvation, she spent her childhood winters sharing the family's small house with their singular, sickly cow for warmth. Despite this searing poverty and any obvious opportunity for self-improvement, Helena learned to read and write in Polish, finding within herself an innate curiosity and hunger for an undefined something else. And though she spoke little about how she found the money to

¹ *New York Tribune*, May 11th, 1909, 1.

leave—there were vague allusions to help from the church, and some family and friends—she somehow managed to finance her passage to America.

It had been a long journey from Niedzwiada, her village in Galicia, Kingdom of Austria and Hungary, to Bremen, a German coastal city and hub from which Europeans like her set out on their ocean voyage to the United States. Back home, Helena had been the second-eldest daughter of a thirteen-member family. She was literate enough in Polish to read the Bible, but she had greater aspirations than her peasant family could provide. Unable to speak English, and with only a few dollars in her pocket, Helena made her way to the city of Derby, not far from New Haven, in the southwest part of Connecticut, where she joined her sister, Zofia, and some other distant relatives.

While Helena travelled without her family, she did not make the journey alone. Two other young women from her village- Maryanna Jablonski and Anna Zurawska, also left their families and went with Helena to make a better life in the United States. Together, they were part of the migration of Polish women from Polish territories of Russia, Austria and Germany into the Northeast of the United States in the early 20th century. These women often came alone, or in groups of young, unmarried women as Helena did, and when they arrived in the industrialized Northeast of the United States, they joined extended family, worked, and raised their own families in the growing Polish American communities in the first two decades of the 20th century. Helena quickly found work in a dress factory in Derby, where she worked long hours at painstaking tasks, while gradually becoming part of Derby's Polish community.

In 1914, almost five years to the day after her arrival in the United States, Helena married Franciszek Mazan, a fellow Galician Pole from Gora Ropczycka, a village that was only a few miles away from Niedzwiada, but who had immigrated to Connecticut as a child some ten years

before Helena. The marriage, though full of strife and economic and personal disasters, produced nine surviving children. They gave their children, all American-born and American raised, Christian names that linked their Polish heritage to their new American roots. Paul, Frederik, Lucian, Stanley “Peniu”, Richard, Raymond, Wanda, Constance and Patricia all grew up in the four-room tenement apartment on the second floor of 921 Grand Avenue in New Haven, Connecticut.

After her marriage, Helena was not able to continue working in a factory while also raising young children, so she had to find a new way to contribute to her family’s income. Helena worked as a cleaning lady for much of her children’s lives and was able to support all nine of her children with nearly non-existent outside financial support. This thesis examines how Helena was able to do this all, through both personal choices in work and profession, and how she was supported through her Polish American community as well.

Polish Women and Their Stories

Helena was part of a generation of young women who left Poland in order to seek economic opportunity in the United States, and who helped to strengthen and actively be a part of Polish American culture and identity. This thesis seeks to examine the ways in which women such as Helena shared a remarkable immigration and early Americanization process. It looks at how women like Helena raised their children in the United States to examine the development of Polish American communities through a focus on the women who enabled these communities to flourish. This is the examination of the development of the Polish American identity within Polonia, or the Polish diaspora, specifically in Connecticut, through the lens of female Polish immigrants. This thesis also looks at how women like Helena navigated the tensions between

new and old cultural traditions while working and raising children. This thesis will use the story of Helena Tokarz as well as the oral histories of other Polish women, to argue that Polish women who came to the United States in the 1910s and raised families through the 1940s contributed to a unique and overlooked aspect of Polish American history. It is easy to document the lives of women who contributed to important historical events, but it is the often-quiet stories of these women who created lives for themselves and their children as mothers that provide a central understanding Polish American history.

By using Helena's story as an outline in addition to the oral histories of women with a similar background, this thesis seeks to bring to light the stories of these women as they fit into the stories of the greater Polish American community. The oral histories that are used in this thesis are rich and varied. They come largely from the Special Collections archives at University of Connecticut and the Polish American Collection at Central Connecticut State Universities. These oral histories are compiled as part of a multitude of ethnic and cultural oral histories, such as the WPA Federal Writers Project, and the People's Polish project in order to help to memorialize the diverse ethnic background of industrialized Connecticut. The oral histories often cover large parts of these women's lives, and show their stories from immigration, to working as young women in factories, and to raising children in America. This thesis uses these oral histories to understand these women's stories and to create a narrative framework for the development of the livelihoods of Polish American women in the United States.

Historiography

This thesis contributes to the growing history of the Polish Americans in the United States. Most of this literature is based on oral histories, letters and other primary documents. The

vast majority of research focuses on the Polish American community, showing the development of the community as a whole. Research on women as central to the development of the Polish American community has been expanded upon in recent years. However, there is ample room within this subject for a focus on a narrative surrounding Polish immigrant women in America relying on their voices and memories. By creating a narrative that traces the story of Helena and other Polish immigrant women in New Haven, Connecticut, this thesis hopes to add to this more recent dialogue about the importance of women in the development of cultural and ethnic identity in Polish American communities. A close examination of Helena's life, in conjunction with the oral histories of her contemporary Polish female immigrants, shows how Helena adhered to as well as deviated from cultural and societal norms. This individual focus on one woman's story helps to add to the Polish American narrative a more detailed view of individual women who helped to create the Polish American home and identity.

Much of the literature surrounding Polish immigrants and the development of a Polish American identity focuses on the story of male immigration and exceptional men within Polish American communities, and the development of Polonia through these immigrants. This thesis takes a different task, seeking to focus on a new way in which to examine and explore the many ways that Polish women's stories were either typical or unusual, as well as the critical ways that Polish women helped to create and define their communities and the Polish identity that their children carried. However, female historians' analyses of Polish immigrant women through their oral histories shed light on the personal narratives of the women in these communities, whose stories and journeys are remarkably similar to Helena's. This thesis contributes to our understanding of the history of Polish women in America by focusing on the lives of the women who raised the first generation of Polish Americans.

John J. Bukowczyk, one of the most preeminent Polish American scholars, focuses on the development of a Polish American community, a community in exile in a host country of America in his seminal 1987 work *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish Americans*. Bukowczyk analyzes the crises of identity between the immigrant generations and the first-born generations of Polish Americans while also delving into the development of the Polish American identity itself, and its contributions to the development of the Polish diaspora, or Polonia. However, he pays little attention to the immigrant path and personal journey of the Polish women who made up this community.² Another preeminent historian of Polish American studies, Stanislaus Blejwas, also explores the development of the Polish American identity and community through analysis of the centrality of the Catholic parishes around which these communities formed.³ Though Blejwas focused on the centrality of the religious aspect of the Polish American community, still the individual narratives of women and their involvement are overlooked.

Historian Laura Anker studied the oral histories of women in New Haven as they shared their immigrant stories from the early 20th century.⁴ Anker's analysis of the oral history compilation shows a community of women, and especially Polish women, who as newly arrived immigrants had to contend with multiple stresses of gender, immigrant identity and economic goals of the working class, which contributed to a unique identity of gender and ethnic

² John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

³ Stanislaus A. Blejwas *St. Stanislaus B. & M. Parish, Meriden, Connecticut: A Century of Connecticut Polonia, 1891-1991*. (Polish Studies Program Monographs: Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, Connecticut and St. Stanislaus Parish Council Meriden, Connecticut).

⁴ Laura Anker. 1988. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." *Polish American Studies* 45 (2): 23-49.

belonging. Anker highlights how immigrant women from Eastern and Central Europe played a central role in the immigration and Americanization processes of their communities.

Anker's work helped to introduce the female-led perspective on immigration that is often lacking from literature surrounding the study of Polish Americans. Anker shows how many of the interviews she compiled put women at the forefront of the immigration process. In their lives in America, Anker sees these women as being deeply tied to the community and ethnic identity surrounding their Polish Catholic parishes in Connecticut. This identification broadens Blejwas's analyses, showing that women also played an important role in the church in the Polish American community.⁵ Anker importantly added an analysis of first-person narratives which gave a more personalized and female-centric interpretation of the community building that Blejwas studied.

Anker writes of the varying ways that women either stayed in or entered the workforce in order to maintain a "viable family life. They worked in factories, as office cleaners, or domestic servants. Of Polish women in particular, Anker found that "Polish women, many of whom were single and alone when they arrived in the United States, were more likely to work as domestics than Jewish women, who came with their families or Italian women, who came to join husbands or fathers who had emigrated earlier.³⁴"⁶ In this way, Helena had worked in a dress factory until her marriage, but she rejoined the workforce as a cleaner in order to support her family when her husband could not provide for them economically. This thesis shows how Helena's life

⁵ John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). Mary Patrice Erdmans, *The Grasinski Girls: The Choices They Had And the Choices They Made* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004).

⁶Laura Anker. 1988. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." 23-49.

mirrored the trends set forth by other Polish immigrant women during this period, while also examining how Helena deviated from the standards of the time.

Christine Harzig's 1997 *Peasant Maids - City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America*, focused broadly on the challenges that Central and Eastern European immigrant women had to face upon their immigration to the United States. Harzig detailed the struggle that these immigrant women dealt with upon arrival to an often urban and industrial new home in the United States- a far cry from their agricultural, rural background. Because of the industrialization of labor- both in and outside of the home- in the United States, Central and Eastern European immigrant women dealt with tremendous differences in cultural expectation in regard to work, housekeeping, and motherhood after their immigration.

Mary Patrice Erdmans' 2004 family history and reflective, *The Grasinski Girls: The Choices They Had and the Choices They Made*, is composed of historical analysis and family oral histories in order to understand her family's female Polish American identities as well as the immigration history of her Polish forebears.⁷ Though the women Erdmans interviews are second generation Polish Americans, their interviews give an explicitly female perspective on immigration and identity. Their strong Polish identity, though only their grandparents were born there, is shown to have been passed down by strong female influence in their family- forming a family ethnic identity that was kept whole through traditionally female-derived cultural and ethnic traditions, such as cooking, holiday celebration, and the running of the home.

The passing down of culture from immigrant women in both Anker's and Erdmans' works is an important tool in understanding how Polish immigrant women in the early 20th century helped to forge new American identities- American identities inextricably linked with

⁷ Mary Patrice Erdmans, *The Grasinski Girls: The Choices They had and the Choices They Made* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

their foremost Polish identities. It is also important to factor in the consideration that two important works of history that are focused in oral histories are made possible by the sharing of history by women, which could help aid the examination of how Polish women in America created their new American identities while also preserving their ethnic Polish identities, even though the Poland they left in the first two decades of the 20th century was not technically Poland, and as they sought to create a community for themselves in the United States.

Historian Patricia Yocum supports Anker's analysis in her 2015 article "Leaving Dobrzechów,"⁸ which traces the migration patterns of a Polish village from Austrian-controlled Galicia. Yocum's statistical analysis shows important data that corroborates Anker's female-led immigration oral histories, as many women were leaving the village in groups in order to create emigration chains of young women immigrating together, while family-based emigration often revolved around the ways in which the mother could continue to support the family in Poland, or whether or not the mother was needed to support her family through entering the workforce in America. This thesis contributes to the historiography by taking a narrative approach to the immigration and Americanization of these women. By following the linear outline of Polish immigrant women's lives, this thesis seeks to show the intricacies of the everyday life of the Polish immigrant women in Connecticut.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is organized in three chapters as a way to follow the development of Polish women's stories. It follows Helena's journey from a village in Austrian-controlled Poland, to life as a young working woman, and then through her journey as a mother in America to explore path

⁸ Patricia B. Yocum. "Leaving Dobrzechów: Immigration from a Galician Village." *Polish American Studies* 70, no. 2 (2013): 79-92.

of the many young Polish women who also made this journey. This organization shows how Helena, through her immigration process and early years in the United States, was a typical, young female Polish immigrant moving to Connecticut during this period.

Chapter One, “Why Polish Women Came to America, and How They Involved Themselves in Economic and Cultural Activities”, begins when young, single Polish women left their homes to come to America in the 1910s. By analyzing the economic impetus of their immigration, Chapter One will then show how it spurred immediate involvement in the American economy. Chapter one also analyzes the familial ties that helped to facilitate these young women’s departure from home and their early adjustment in the industrialized Northeast United States. It will show that these young women relied on the close ties that bound them together during their journey in new ways once they reached the United States. These ties helped them find employment and housing and helped them become part of the community of Polish immigrants in the United States.

Chapter Two, “Polish Women and the Development of the Polish American Identity in the Home”, focuses on how these young women functioned as wives and mothers in American society. This chapter examines the ways these women, once married with children, strived to pass down their Polish culture and ethnic heritage to their American-born children. It argues that women made the home the heart of the preservation of this culture by cooking ethnic foods and speaking Polish to their children at home. Chapter Two also examines Polish immigrant mothers as they strived to raise their children at home while economically supporting them. It looks at how Polish women negotiated the competing tensions between the American gender roles that defined women’s place at home and the economic realities that forced them to leave the home to earn money for their families. Mothers, by necessity, worked outside the home while raising

children, creating conflict with gender norms and the needs and expectations of families for the time period.

Chapter Three, “Polish Women in American Society” continues the analysis of adult life of these women, looking at the ways gender and the constraints of work and motherhood had an impact on their lives. While Chapter Two focused on the home, this chapter examines the ways in which women functioned outside of the home- in the Polish American community and within the greater outside working place. In addition, this chapter focuses on the ways in which women like Helena deviated from these norms while still falling into the larger categorization of Polish immigrant women in Connecticut. Chapter Three will show the ways in which conflict between old and new continued to affect Polish immigrant women’s lives as wives and mothers.

Overall, this thesis seeks to create a personalized narrative of young Polish women who came to the United States, and Connecticut in particular, in the 1910s and created communities and lives for themselves and supported and raised families in the 1920s and 1940s. Although these women, like Helena, were all seeking new opportunities in the industrialized land of promise in America, their individual histories provide insight into what distinguished them from each other, what united them as women, and their role in the broad narrative of Polish immigration and the development of the Polish immigrant community.

* * * *

Historians often bring their personal interests and connections to history into their work- this is mine. Though the period that I cover in this thesis begins over one hundred years ago, in a world that should be almost unrecognizable for someone of my age, it is closer to me than anyone might expect. My grandfather, Raymond, along with his twin, Richard, were the youngest sons of Helena, born on March 12, 1929. The inseparable twins only married after

separating for the first time in their lives after my grandfather went to England in the late 1950s, where he met my grandmother. My grandfather ended up having children in his early thirties- rather late for his generation. My grandfather's youngest daughter, my mother, again had children late in life, and I am the eldest of these two. My childhood revolved around the stories and memories that my grandfather told me after dinner, as I sat enraptured as he spun tales of a magical, adventure-filled childhood that were so rich in detail that I felt that I was almost there.

However, these stories were underscored by the fact that underneath the excitement of a young boy living in a dynamic and multicultural city, they were still the stories of a young boy who grew up in a tenement, and whose father was never once mentioned. Instead, the magical force behind these stories was his mother, Helena- a tiny, indomitable woman, whose skills included making a meal out of anything, and wrangling neighborhood boys away from whatever authority they had dared to cross that week. At the center of all the stories my grandfather told me was how Helena was able to create a life for herself and her children against the backdrop of the Great Depression. Though the adventures of my grandfather's childhood were thrilling beyond belief, it was his mother and her story who I began to find the most compelling subject the older I got. When I found her immigration documents online in high school, my grandfather had never seen them, and did not know any more details about her journey than that which have been shared for this thesis.

For years now, I have recorded my grandfather talking at night after dinner, and I have hours of him speaking in his distinctive voice about his childhood, his neighbors, and if you listen closely, the occasional pronunciation of a word that mars his otherwise perfect English, a pronunciation that hints to his first language, Polish. He found ways to create beauty and

laughter out of an oftentimes sad and difficult childhood and created lasting connections between me and my family's history.

My grandfather always highlighted the importance of his mother's fortitude, patience, and commitment to creating a life for her children that was better than the one she had lived. Though I never had the privilege of meeting my great-grandmother, her life and accomplishments were a guiding ethical source for me. As I began to study history at Tufts, I became fascinated by the ways that women were involved in American life and realized that I could use the skills I have developed as a student of history to place my great-grandmother's life in a historical context.

Since I first found Helena's Ellis Island documents, I have sought to create a deeper connection between my ancestors and me, to better understand who my generation and I are in today's America. As I began my research into New Haven, Connecticut and the lives of Polish immigrants in my great-grandmother's community, I saw patterns and shared experiences in the lives of other young female Polish immigrants whose trajectories mirrored that of Helena's. Though like Helena, these women were not notable figures of their time, their stories and shared experiences are crucial parts of history that combine both the study of immigration and gender in the early 20th century in Connecticut. Through analyzing the oral histories of women of Helena's age, background, and socioeconomic situations, I was able to see the ways in which my family's history both fit and deviated from the norms of this time and have sought to create a place for the narratives of the women whose oral histories were central to my thesis, in an academic setting. This way, their contributions from their daily lives will be able to be a part of the broader historiography of immigrant women who helped to shape America today.

Chapter 1: Why Polish Women Came to America, and How They Involved Themselves in Economic and Cultural Activities

After arriving at Ellis Island on May 11, 1909, Helena made her way to Connecticut in order to reach the distant family she had in the United States.⁹ Helena had come to New York City by way of an ocean liner from Bremen, Germany, and to Bremen by train from Niedzwiada. Though this journey was taxing, frightening, and further than she had ever travelled in her life, Helena did not make this journey alone. Travelling with her were three “other girls from the village”, all in their late teens and early twenties and all hoping for a chance at a new life in the United States, like Helena. Their arrival on May 11, 1909, marked the end of their arduous trip, and the beginning of a new, more challenging feat- that of creating a life for themselves in America, the one that they had dreamed of. This chapter explores the reasons why women like my great-grandmother Helena left their homes and families in search of opportunities in America, and how they created new lives for themselves in their unfamiliar new homeland.

Helena's new life started in the small but thriving town of Derby, CT, whose Polish community had been in place since the late 19th century, and where she had some distant family members. Though her sister had made the journey to Connecticut before her, they were the only two family members to make their way to the United States, although 2 brothers made the journey from Poland to Hong Kong and eventually to the Yukon, almost 4000 miles away. Thus, Helena had to forge a new life and community for herself without the support of the family she had grown up with in Galicia. In Derby, and later New Haven, Connecticut, Helena found work

⁹ “Passenger Record: Helena Tokarz”, The Statue of Liberty, Ellis Island Foundation, Inc. Accessed February 20th, 2021, <https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/passenger-details/czoxMjoiMTAxNTkyMTgwMzc0Ijs=/czo5OiJwYXNzZW5nZXIiOw==>

in a dressmaking factory alongside other immigrant women. There, she joined Polish community groups revolving around the St. Stanislaus Roman Catholic parish in New Haven.

It was through the Catholic parish in New Haven that Helena met Franciszek Mazan, a fellow Galician-born Pole, who had come to the United States ten years before. They married in 1914, and Helena began a life of marriage, motherhood, and work. For the next fifteen years, she raised nine children while doing work as domestic help during the day and cleaning office buildings at night—and all while speaking broken English, and with next to no ability to read or write in English. Her husband was largely absent in the family's life and was of almost no economic or emotional support. The narrative framework of Helena's history aligns neatly with the trends of the young Polish women of her age who immigrated to America on their own to seek opportunities unavailable in their rural villages in Poland. This narrative also sheds a light on the unique situation of Helena and her family- her husband was alive, but not an active participant, making her a single mother though she wasn't technically so.

This chapter seeks to examine how Polish women like Helena not only made their way into American society, but created strong communities propelled by the strength of the women who undertook a massive change in their lives as teenagers and succeeded in their endeavors to forge a new life in the United States. In this chapter the themes of the importance of extended family ties and cultural and religious ties are repeated throughout the initial experiences of Polish female immigrants. The immigration journey of Polish women, and their early experiences in the United States, are often overlooked.¹⁰ However, an analysis of these early experiences helps to

¹⁰ Mary Patrice Erdmans. "Gender and Family in Polish American Studies." *Polish American Studies* 77, no. 1 (2020): 29-37.

clarify the broader history of female Polish immigration against the backdrop of the study of Polish Americans.

It is thus necessary to highlight within the existing immigration narrative framework the voices of and historical inclusion of Polish women who immigrated to the United States during this period. By excluding them in the prevailing narrative, the female influence and desire for immigration, half of a population's narrative history is lost and with it, the full history of a people and their entrance into American history in the 20th century disappears. There remains a gap in the existing literature surrounding Polish Americans that focuses specifically on the personal histories of women in similar situations as Helena. Polish women immigrating to the United States played no less a critical role than did men in the Polish immigration movement. It is necessary to include the female-led movement in the continued academic research regarding Polish immigration in the United States during the early 20th century.¹¹

The period from 1900-1920 was a critical time in the immigration history of Polish people to the United States, as well as for the development of Catholic, Polish American communities throughout the United States. During this influx, young Polish women in their teens and early twenties made their way to the United States either alone, or sometimes with other young women or adults from their villages or nearby areas. In leaving their native country on their own or with only a few other young women, these young Polish women were unusual in comparison to other Catholic European immigrants, such as Italians and Irish immigrants, who often immigrated as family units. Though this is not to say that Polish women never immigrated with families, Helena's story and the stories of other young female Polish immigrants emphasize their often-solo journeys. While the majority of these young women left their childhood homes

¹¹ Mary Patrice Erdmans. "Gender and Family in Polish American Studies, 29-37.

and families forever, they recreated the strength and support of the family through a combination of extended family, friends, and Church, to eventually form a strong cultural community within their newfound home.¹²

* * * *

Like Helena, Polish immigrant women who came to the United States in their teens and early twenties through the 1910s and 1920s were largely driven by the lack of economic and social opportunities in their home countries. The continued Partitions of Poland, and the subsequent economic factors that kept the Polish peasantry from economic success, had created generations of stagnation that began to turn around with the exodus of workers to more industrialized countries such as the United States in the early 20th century. The young women who came in this period largely followed earlier trends of Polish male immigrants who left their homes in search of the economic mobility that was possible in an industrial society.

Through family and area connections, Polish women traveled with other women for protection and community and joined extended family members who had already established themselves in the United States and thus could provide a living space and further connections to the American Polish community, and most importantly, possible sources of employment as well. Immigration was supported through familial, ethnic, and religious connections, with young Polish women finding support throughout the journey through their friendships. Upon arrival in the United States, they used the connections they fostered during the journey to create strong cultural communities as support systems.

¹² Laura Anker. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." 23-49.

Why Young Polish Women Came to America

Villagers in the Polish territories in the early 20th century had scant opportunities for education, so the levels of literacy were much lower than in more industrialized nations of the time period. Deliberate administrative oversight, with a goal of maintaining the system of agricultural peasantry that upheld the upper social classes, especially in Russian Poland, was a part of the imperial administration that actively avoided educating its Polish peasant subjects¹³. Subsequently, many of the peasant Poles who arrived in the United States were suited only for low paying, physically demanding jobs in factories and mills, which were often filled with other newly arrived immigrants such as Italians, Jews, and others from Eastern and Southern Europe who were also fleeing poverty and political instability and were all thus ready and willing to take low paying jobs whenever available. Young female immigrants, whose economic status was dire, consequently took whatever jobs were available.¹⁴

These oral histories of Polish women in New Haven show the drive of these young women to seek economic opportunity in the United States, demonstrating that it was not just male immigrants who were seeking to prosper financially, but that women were actively taking part in the trend for economic migration as well.¹⁵ These young women often cited the inaccessibility of opportunity or stability within their rural villages as a reason for emigration, and that the potential of a new country was enough encouragement to make the perilous journey. Speaking of her background, Mrs. Y, a Polish immigrant who came to the United States as a young woman, says that she came, "Because there was nothing to do in A___. In Poland at that

¹³Dominic A. Pacyga. "Polish Emigration to the United States before World War One and Capitalist Development." *Polish American Studies* 46, no. 1 (1989): 10-18.

¹⁴ Harzig, Christiane. 1997. *Peasant Maids - City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America*. Cornell University Press.

¹⁵ Dominic A. Pacyga. "Polish Emigration to the United States before World War One and Capitalist Development." 10-18.

time you had to go to a big city to be educated and nobody had much money. Under the Austrians taxes were high and if you couldn't pay, they came to your house and took things- even the pillows off beds- or they made you work on the road.”¹⁶ Fifty years after her immigration to America, she still spoke vividly of the compelling economic necessity that drove her to seek a better life in America.

How Familial Ties Facilitated Immigration

Helena's journey by train and then boat from Galicia to Connecticut, by way of Germany and New York City, was not easy, yet for her and the other young Polish women making the journey to the United States, it was only part of their immigration story. Though the length of the steamboat journey was approximately two weeks, the journey from their small rural villages, through major port cities such as Bremen and their eventual arrival in the United States was emotionally and physically taxing. It is important to remember that these young women, often in their mid to late teens, were leaving their homes and families for the first time, entering a country with no language skills and often unfamiliar family members or friends who had already made the journey. The magnitude of difference, from the world they were leaving to the industrial hub of the United States which they were entering, was immense.

The historian Laura Anker writes that, “Daughters accompanied mothers and siblings or came to Connecticut by themselves. These immigrant women had years of valuable experience accessing networks of mutuality and support, managing family economies, and organizing family enterprises.”¹⁷ By connecting with each other for safety and support in their immigration

¹⁶ Carol Williams. "Life History of a Polish Immigrant." *Polish American Studies* 25, no. 2 (1968): 88

¹⁷ Laura Anker. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." 27.

journey, young Polish women formed strong bonds that later helped them succeed in the United States. This is evidenced by the populating of towns and communities by Polish immigrants from the same area- such as in Derby and New Haven, Connecticut, where a large percentage of Galician immigrants lived,¹⁸ While these young women lacked formal education, they had developed skills that “not only allowed women to negotiate the migration process itself, but also enabled them to muster the resources and create the networks to deal with more years of hardship and struggle in a new land.”¹⁹ Anker’s analysis of the interviews of these women shows not only how immigration trends were family-based, but most importantly how centralized they were around women, and in particular, young, unmarried women such as Helena.²⁰ This chapter expands on the ways that these women used these connections to facilitate their entryway into American society and to their Polish American communities as well.

One young Polish immigrant, Anna Sangailo, used female connections in order to find employment immediately after her arrival in New York. “I was so thrilled and happy to be in America,” she recalled. “On Monday I found a job, the lady I was staying with had friends and found me a job. It was very hard because I could not understand anything, but she was nice... I stayed there about eight months. She paid me eight dollars a month.”²¹ Sangailo’s connections enabled her to begin participating in the economic life of the United States only days after her arrival, even as she recounts that she had no knowledge of the language.²² This ability to quickly find employment shows the power of female relationship building, and how crucial it was for

¹⁹ Laura Anker. “Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940.” 27

²⁰ Laura Anker. “Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940.” 28

²¹ Anna Sangailo “People’s Polish”, Ethnic Heritage Project, University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections, Center for Oral History Interviews Collection.

²² Anna Sangailo “People’s Polish”.

Polish immigrant women to foster these connections, especially for women like Sangailo whose initial skills only gave her the ability to work as a cleaner. Such jobs were found through word of mouth and connections between women, and Sangailo was able to use these connections in order to immediately begin her first steps into American life. Anker writes that these ties continued to be crucial as Polish women strived to adapt their Polish identity to their new lives in America. The young women who used these immigration and extended family ties were able to gradually expand on them and become members of Polish American communities.²³

Anker's analysis of the oral histories of Polish women in New Haven highlights the importance of these connections in their development of community. Librarian at the University of Michigan, Patricia B. Yocum's "Leaving Dobrzechow" shows the statistics behind these bonds- remarking on the fact that many Polish immigrants emigrated from Galicia with others they knew. Yocum writes that, "According to the manifests, all immigrants were joining someone they knew. For nearly half (49.7 percent) of the adults from Dobrzechów, that person was a first-degree relative. Assuming that when a brother-in-law was listed as the relative, a single woman was actually joining her married sister, the proportion of immigrants joining first-degree relatives was 67.8 percent. Single women most frequently joined their sisters (41.2 percent), as so defined, followed by their cousins (16.2 percent)."²⁴ Yocum's analysis shows how commonplace these trends that were described by Anker were that even within one small village, the community-based immigration path was clearly established.²⁵ The commonality of family migration chains, and the importance of joining a family member in the United States- which, at

²³ Laura Anker. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." 30

²⁴ Patricia B. Yocum. "Leaving Dobrzechów: Immigration from a Galician Village." 79-92.

²⁵ Patricia B. Yocum. "Leaving Dobrzechów: Immigration from a Galician Village.", 79-92.

the time, was often a necessity to gain entrance into the country- was evident throughout Polish immigration.²⁶

Yocum's follow up to her initial article on the immigration patterns of Dobrzechów, titled *Leaving Kożuchów, a Village in Dobrzechów Parish, Galicia*, shows the repetition of the same trends elsewhere in Galicia. Yocum notes that Kożuchów, a smaller city close to Dobrzechów, had a smaller yet comparable percentage of immigrants to the United States during the same period. Yocum notes "twenty-eight single women, fifteen to thirty years old, comprised the largest subset of adults from Kożuchów, as they did from Dobrzechów, and at a similar percentage. But whereas 90 percent of single women from Dobrzechów were twenty years old or younger, only 71 percent from Kożuchów were in that category. With a median age of 17.5 years, single women from Kożuchów were older than their Dobrzechów counterparts, whose median age was 16.5 years. In either case, the size of the contingent of single women is noteworthy and leads to questions about the conditions that propelled young women from their rural homes and the factors that drew them to distant places."²⁷ Yocum's statistics bring to the forefront the knowledge that young, single Polish women in Galicia were leaving their villages at an intriguingly high rate. This occurrence now raises the question of what the circumstances were of the women who left, and what became of them upon their arrival to the United States. This chapter seeks to examine the young women during their first steps in the United States.

Anna Sangailo remembered that she stayed with a distant relative when she first arrived in New Haven- someone whom she had not known and had not been in direct contact with, but through family ties, had welcomed her into her home. Though she did not personally know her distantly related female cousin, by having this family connection she was able to immediately

²⁶ Patricia B. Yocum. "Leaving Dobrzechów: Immigration from a Galician Village.", 79-92.

²⁷ Patricia B. Yocum. "Leaving Dobrzechów: Immigration from a Galician Village.", 79-92.

make a new home and life for herself in her new city. Sangailo recalls that there “were seven of us from our village- a couple of young boys and girls, a couple of older men”, clearly fulfilling the trends migrating as a group, but not as a nuclear or even extended family, and showing that the call for immigration transcended both gender and age for Polish people in the years leading up to World War One.²⁸

Mrs. Y is yet another woman whose immigration journey fits alongside the stories of Helena and other women. Williams approached a priest in an undisclosed Polish Catholic church parish in order to find a subject. Williams wrote that she asked the priest if “he could give me the name of a middle-aged or old woman who spoke English well enough for me to interview her in English.” Williams also told the priest she wanted an “ordinary” person, not an “exceptional” person, who followed with him giving her Mrs. Y’s information.²⁹ Consequently, Mrs. Y seems to have fit the priest’s conception of the typical Polish American woman who had come to the United States as a young woman, following the trends this chapter examines. The priest saw her as a woman who had the right background and history to be interviewed for her experience as a Polish immigrant woman, showing immediately the depth of connection and community found within Polish Catholic church parishes in the United States.

Mrs. Y. interviewed by researcher Carol Williams in 1968, also explains her immigration from Galicia as supported in part by family members who had already immigrated. “my two older sisters came to America before me. One came four years before me and one two years. After I came I sent for my younger sister but she was luckier than me. I sent her a second-class ticket and I came third class.”³⁰ Though Mrs. Y made the journey from Poland to the United

²⁸ Anna Sangailo “People’s Polish”.

²⁹ Carol Williams. “Life History of a Polish Immigrant.” 87

³⁰ Williams, Carol. “Life History of a Polish Immigrant.” *Polish American Studies* 25, no. 2 (1968): 89

States alone, she was met at Ellis Island by one of her sisters, who then brought her into her home and introduced her to American working life and society. In Mrs. Y's case, the solo journey was supported by having female relatives in the United States ready to help her in her first steps in a new country.

Anna and Mrs. Y's stories of joining relatives who helped them when they first arrived in the United States, are reminiscent of Helena's own story. Like Helena, they were young Polish women who arrived in Connecticut in the same period, and who relied on relatives for support and guidance while first setting out. Helena was the first in her immediate family to immigrate to Connecticut, so the family ties she was relying on were distant, as she met her relatives for the first time upon her arrival. However, Helena later echoed Mrs. Y's own process of helping and supporting a younger sister make the same journey. Though Helena was joined by other young women from her village and the surrounding area, they were all in the same position of looking for support from family members who were already in the United States.³¹ Yet the very fact that they had people waiting for them shows the ways in which women used their connections for support and practical help during their immigration journey and first years in the United States.

Sangailo's interview is a concrete example of the trend that Anker identified through her analysis of oral history interviews from New Haven.³² Sangailo's interview shows how young women used the family ties that that helped aid the immigration process that Anker wrote about upon their arrival in the United States. Familial connections were thus able to go past just supporting these young women in their journey to America, but also helped them form the first

³¹ Patricia B. Yocum. "Leaving Dobrzechów: Immigration from a Galician Village.", 79-92.

³² Laura Anker. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." 28.

strong bonds needed to establish communities in their new homes.³³ These young Polish women, though making the perilous journey at a young age, were nonetheless taking part in large familial patterns of relationships. By using the connections for their journey, they continued the transatlantic sharing of Polish identity and culture.

Arrival and Early Steps in the United States: Young Polish Women Making Their Way

Once in the United States, young Polish women had to contend not only with a new country, language, and culture but also with a new way of being women. Polish immigrant women who came to the United States became part of the Polish diaspora, eventually known as “Polonia”, which helped to create Polish ethnic and cultural communities throughout the world before Poland became a state again in 1918.³⁴ The young women who came to the United States were immigrants who bore the burden of the moniker of “za chlebem³⁵” immigrants- or, Galician Polish immigrants who, in their homeland, did not have enough opportunity to pay for nor produce bread, the most basic of necessities, and thus were forced to migrate and create a new life and opportunities elsewhere.³⁶ An immigrant such as this could not be picky about her work and employment, and thus often found herself working in a factory, or as a cleaner or washerwoman. This was not unusual, as most immigrants who came during this time period were also seeking immediate entryways to American economic life. Helena, who was one of thirteen siblings, came to the United States because in Galicia, there was not enough food, let alone opportunity, in her family to go around. Helena worked immediately upon her arrival to create a

³³ Laura Anker. “Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940.” 29

³⁴ J. Zubrzycki. "Emigration from Poland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Population Studies* 6, no. 3 (1953): 248-72.

³⁵ Patricia B. Yocum. "Leaving Dobrzechów: Immigration from a Galician Village.", 79-92.

³⁶ J. Zubrzycki. "Emigration from Poland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." 248-72.

life for herself in the United States that wasn't blighted by hunger and desperation as was her life in Galicia.

Mrs. Y first lived with one of her two older sisters who had previously immigrated to the United States. Mrs. Y found her first job at laundromat, where her older sisters and other immigrant women worked.³⁷ Mrs. Y lived for eight years with her sister and brother-in-law, until she herself married and moved out.³⁸ Mrs. Y recalls that, "When I worked I earned \$5 a week and I worked six days a week from seven in the morning until six at night. That isn't very much, and it wasn't good for young girls to work such long hours as they did in those days. But they give you a raise if you're good. I asked for a raise after a while from \$5 to \$6 and finally I was earning \$9 a week."³⁹ Mrs. Y came to the United States and immediately began working long, hard hours in order to make her immigration worthwhile.

Polish Women and the Catholic Church as a Facilitator of Community

According to scholar Thomas Monzell, in his article, "The Catholic Church and the Americanization of the Polish Immigrant" regarding the process of Americanization through a religious spectrum, "The most important step taken by the American Catholic hierarchy... was the establishment and legalization of national parishes."⁴⁰ Monzell argues that the Catholic Church in the United States was a powerful tool of Americanization, especially for Polish immigrants. Individual parishes aided in the Americanization process by first fostering ethnic belonging within Catholic diaspora communities. Following this, the parishes helped create

³⁷ Carol Williams. "Life History of a Polish Immigrant." 87

³⁹ Williams, Carol. "Life History of a Polish Immigrant." 90

⁴⁰ Thomas I Monzell. "The Catholic Church and the Americanization of the Polish Immigrant." *Polish American Studies* 26, no. 1 (1969): 1-15.

ethnic communities that were sufficiently strong to allow American identification and sentiment to be built upon in order to encourage Americanization. This Americanization was created after the bonds of Polish diaspora community were centered around the Catholic parishes.⁴¹ Polish immigrant women were able to use these bonds to help form community and establish identity within their Polish American communities.

The Polish Catholic church in America was the center of community building in America for new Polish immigrants. In addition to facilitating their entry through language and job assistance, the Church was also a physical structure around which the Polish immigrant community could develop. The church eased the entry of the Polish immigrant community into their new homeland while also encouraging the ethnic community and solidarity of the newly arrived immigrants. In creating a center of community involvement and belonging, the Church also helped to facilitate the entrance of young women into the industrial world of America by helping to connect recent arrivals with new jobs.⁴²

The Church did, nonetheless, continue to push traditional gender norms on young Polish men and women who married and started families in the United States.⁴³ This included ideals such as the necessity of marriage, the importance of women as mothers and wives, and the preference for women to not work outside the home. As Polish women quickly entered into the workforce once they arrived in the United States, they also began the process of truly becoming part of these Polish American communities. This was often fostered through the parishes that the Polish communities revolved around. This proved to be a critical part of the development of Polish American communities themselves. One Joseph Dulka recounts that his mother was able

⁴¹ Thomas I Monzell. "The Catholic Church and the Americanization of the Polish Immigrant." 1-15.

⁴² Laura Anker. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." 29.

⁴³ Thomas I Monzell. "The Catholic Church and the Americanization of the Polish Immigrant." 1-15.

to meet his father, another young Polish immigrant, through social events organized through the Church parish in order for young immigrant Poles to meet one another. This was a conscious effort to promote ethnic community through marrying within the community. By creating the opportunity for young Polish immigrants to meet and marry, the parishes helped to create the next generation of Polish Americans.⁴⁴ This is also how Mrs. Y met her Polish immigrant husband, which shows the centrality of the parish in helping to create the opportunity for young immigrant Poles to meet and form community.

Besides forming community through marriage, the parishes also enabled young Polish women to meet and forge friendships with other women. Eva Hudak, a first-generation Polish American born in Connecticut in 1917, also remembered her mother using her Catholic church community as a facilitator of support in her entryway into American life, which she did through joining Church groups for women in the parish.⁴⁵ As Polish women in the United States who arrived in the period before World War One collectively began to enter into an American livelihood, they became members of the Polish diaspora.

Forging a New Life in America through Economic Involvement

New England was the center of industrialized America, with factories producing metal works such as guns and ammunition, and mills producing textiles in abundance in order to help propel America's industrialized capitalist economy. The young Polish women who came to Connecticut and Massachusetts found much-needed work in the factories of New England. As

⁴⁴ Joseph Dulka, interviewed by Matthew Magda. Ethnic Heritage Project, 1974. "People's Polish", Ethnic Heritage Project, University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections, Center for Oral History Interviews Collection. 4.

⁴⁵ Eva Hudak, "Interview with Mrs. Eva Hudak of 266 Funston Avenue, Torrington, Connecticut", interviewed by Matthew Magda. Ethnic Heritage Project, 1975. "People's Polish", University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections, Center for Oral History Interviews Collection. 6

they did not have the language skills needed to communicate with the outside world, their entrance into American political and social life outside of the Polish American community was slow. Monzell noted that Polish immigrants often saw themselves as entering the country already a step behind other Catholic immigrants who populated the same areas, such as Irish immigrants, because they lacked the same English language skills as Irish immigrants had, and thus had a harder barrier of entry into the American workforce.⁴⁶ One Eva Hudak distinctly remembers this in her People's Polish interview, explaining the general feeling within the Catholic community of Torrington, Connecticut, that "if you weren't Irish, you just weren't considered the "tops" in other words."⁴⁷

However, narrative accounts from Polish immigrant women from this time shed light on the dire necessity for the meager pay they earned, and their willingness to put up with unfair and taxing work in order to make ends meet. It follows that young Polish women found themselves as active participants in the industrialized economy of the United States. Polish female immigrants largely followed the trends that found Eastern European women having to recalibrate their traditional livelihoods to contend with an industrialized United States. Economic necessity drove these women to move away from gender norms, such as women working only within the home, especially after marriage and with motherhood. Although these women were not necessarily defying norms for the sake of defiance, they were adapting to the economic situation at hand in order to support themselves and their families.

Though Helena's goal in coming to America was not to be a working woman for her entire life, nor was it to subvert norms and enter the workforce as a female worker, she did this

⁴⁶ Thomas I Monzell. "The Catholic Church and the Americanization of the Polish Immigrant." 1-15.

⁴⁷ Eva Hudak, "Interview with Mrs. Eva Hudak of 266 Funston Avenue, Torrington, Connecticut", interviewed by Matthew Magda. Ethnic Heritage Project, 1975. "People's Polish", University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections, Center for Oral History Interviews Collection. 13.

all, nonetheless. Necessity drove Helena to the United States, as it was there that she knew that she could have access to work and money in ways that were not available to her in Poland. Though Helena marched for equal voting rights, she was still a woman who came from a background in which the wife's domain was supposed to be the house. However, work was necessary for her to form a new life for herself in the United States, much as it was for Mrs. Y and the other women of their generation, and so work they did. Though for Helena, subverting the norm by working outside the home after marriage and children wasn't ideal, it was the due to the necessity of her family at the time.

Women such as Sangailo were pleased to have any type of work. Just as Sangailo recounts her first foray into American economic life as a cleaner who found jobs through connections within the Polish ethnic community in Connecticut, so too, does Joseph Dulka's illiterate, teenage mother in Ansonia, Connecticut.⁴⁸ Mrs. Dulka, who had begun her life in America as a cleaning lady, but who had quit after getting married, was obliged to go back to this work after the death of her husband out of dire economic necessity. Though illiterate, Mrs. Dulka was able to make use of her skills in order to support her family when needed.⁴⁹

Mrs. Y's subsequent retelling of her personal history illustrates the way that she and other young Polish immigrants fostered an ethnic community for their American-born children. Mrs. Y finds more economic success through marriage,⁵⁰ and has a slightly better economic background in Poland than did Sangailo⁵¹, yet their stories are still strikingly similar, and fit into the patterns of work and cultural belonging that Anker details in her overview of the Connecticut Federal Writers Project interviews. Mrs. Y's journey, and her immediate entryway into American society

⁴⁸Joseph Dulka, interviewed by Matthew Magda. Ethnic Heritage Project, 1974. "People's Polish".

⁴⁹ Joseph Dulka, interviewed by Matthew Magda. Ethnic Heritage Project, 1974. "People's Polish".

through the workforce also echoes Helena's journey and early years in Connecticut. And like Mrs. Y, Helena met her husband through her Polish Catholic parish, and marrying within a few years of her arrival in the United States. This helps to show that not only were young Polish immigrant women looking to create a life anew for themselves away from economically impoverished Poland, but also to create a new Polish community for themselves in the United States.

Often directly following family members, these young women encountered a harsh economic and social reality in the industrialized areas of the Northeast, such as New Haven, Connecticut. However, their immediate participation in this new economic life enabled them to have economic independence, and forge a new life for themselves, as well as to help support family members and continue the chains of migration. The connections that these young women made were crucial in the development of their American lives, as well as in the development of the Polish American communities that they later raised their American-born children in.

As young, unmarried Polish immigrants grew older, and began to marry, they also began to form strong ties to their adopted homeland. As these young women became wives and mothers, they now had to transition to the roles of wife and caregiver. And in these roles, they passed down to their American-born children Polish cultural and language traditions. However, the economic realities of the time meant that these new wives and mothers had to work outside of the home in order to support their families. These Polish women now faced a new challenge composed of conflicting goals of traditional motherhood and the necessity of working outside the home in their next iteration of their American journey.

Chapter 2: Polish Women and the Development of the Polish American Identity in the Home

Within five years of arriving in the United States in 1909, Helena married a fellow Polish immigrant from Galicia, Franciszek Mazan, on May 7th, 1914. Between 1917 and 1934, Helena bore nine children, six boys and three girls. Despite the longevity of their marriage, Helena was forced to raise and provide for their children alone, as Franciszek proved to be a poor provider due to his alcoholism and criminal activities. Though receiving some financial support through the parish community, Helena was in fact, for many years, the sole provider who supported her family working days and nights as a cleaner in office buildings throughout New Haven. In the natural course of preparing traditional Polish food, the expected attendance at the Polish Catholic church on Sundays, and the use of the only language that the entire family spoke fluently, Polish, in the household, Helena, without having set about it purposefully, raised her children with an appreciation of their Polish heritage. This chapter looks at the ways that Polish immigrant women like Helena used their matriarchal influence, intentionally or not, to instill in their children a Polish identity while also pursuing the goals of assimilation.

Helena raised her children in downtown New Haven, in a vastly multicultural, industrial city that was home to many different ethnic communities along with a Polish community that began to flourish in the early 1900s.⁵² Aj Ewnas, in a document belonging to the Central Connecticut State University's Connecticut Polish American Archives, notes, "the principal Polish section of New Haven is found in a few blocks adjoining State Street", which was the corner where Helena and her family lived on Grand Avenue.⁵³ The Polish section was a city

⁵² AJ Ewnas, "The Poles in New Haven". Connecticut Polish American Archives, Central Connecticut State University

⁵³ Aj Ewnas, "The Polish Section of New Haven". Connecticut Polish American Archives, Central Connecticut State University. 1.

within a city, marked by St. Stanislaus Church, a Polish Roman Catholic church, one of many in the small radius around downtown New Haven that also was the home to many Italian and Irish Americans.⁵⁴ In fact, writing of a street corner only blocks away from the intersection of State and Grand, Evans says that “Pulaski Street is considered a Polish street, although there are a number of Italian families living there. There is a three-story apartment house at the corner of Pulaski and Franklin, covered by asbestos shingles, green on the first story, red on the second and third. This building is occupied by an equal number of Poles and Italians.”⁵⁵

Though Helena raised her children in a diverse urban area, they were still in close proximity to their Polish Catholic parish. Other women - mothers, grandmothers, and young women, - helped take care of her children when she was at work, letting Helena provide for her family while also connecting them to the extended Polish family. Neither Helena, nor any of her female family or friends, would have used the words ‘support structure’, nor would they have thought of it this way - to them, this was simply what was expected through the ties of kinship and common upbringing - nonetheless, these were the support structures that allowed Helena and her family to survive and thrive.

In participating in this community, Helena, through her daily actions, instilled in her children a deep appreciation and connection to Polish culture against the backdrop of the American society that they lived in. By raising her American-born children in a culturally Polish household, Helena created a dual Polish American identity for her children. As with the concept of ‘support structure’, in later years, Helena explained to her granddaughters that there was no intent to create a dual identity for her children. Quite to the contrary, her most fervent wish was for her children to become thoroughly American. It speaks, then, to the strength of Helena’s

⁵⁴ Aj Evnas, “The Polish Section of New Haven”. 2.

⁵⁵ Aj Evnas, “The Polish Section of New Haven”. 2.

native culture, that she did, nonetheless, instill in her children a strongly Polish identity. This contribution of Polish women to the cultural identification of their American born children must be explored further in order to fully comprehend their involvement in creating a Polish American identity. This chapter shows how usage of food and language to teach ethnic and cultural identity was used by Polish immigrant women to cement a Polish ethnic and cultural belonging in their American-born children.

* * * *

The woman as wife, mother, and breadwinner in the Polish family was a role that was irreplaceable, yet historians show the conflict that Polish women faced in regard to economic involvement and importance within the family. Helena, in this tri-partite role for her Polish American family, experienced the conflict that Polish immigrant mothers encountered when raising their children in the United States. Without highly marketable skills and raised to believe it was inappropriate for women to work outside of the home, Helena worked because of economic necessity. Helena, as well as other women such as Mrs. Dulka, show that this conflict of motherhood and working for economic necessity, had to be met in order to succeed in their new life as mothers raising Polish American children. The historian Harriet Bloch, in her article “Changing Domestic Roles among Polish Immigrant Women”, spoke of the necessary roles women played in their lives in Poland roles that were different in equality to those that they would have in America. She notes that because the partnership between husband and wife was strongly economic due to the integral role that women played in the physical running of the farm, men and women were more equal. “It is in fact the women, much more than the men, who manage the actual day-to-day operation of farm and home. Not only are they in charge of

children, kitchen, and house but, as is common throughout Eastern Europe, they are active in heavy field labor as well.”⁵⁶ Now, women such as Helena were working outside of the family unit in combination with their role of wife and mother.

Polish women who had worked alongside their husbands in their family’s agricultural-based households, were not going against societal norms- in fact, they were fulfilling their duty, as outlined by Anker, by contributing necessary agricultural labor alongside their husbands.⁵⁷ Thus, Polish peasant women, though living in harsh economic and social conditions, were nonetheless maintaining an essential position within their family’s economic livelihood. Their involvement in their housework, and physical work around the house and family farm, was seen as a natural and necessary part of life for the Polish peasant.⁵⁸ Unlike the urban industrial setting in which young Polish immigrant women would find themselves in America in the early 20th century, this was no divergence from the home, rather, it was expected and appreciated. Historian Christiane Harzig in her book, “Peasant Maids”, speaks of the increased workload that faced women arriving in an industrial country from a less developed and agricultural background such as rural Poland. No longer were they just feeding their family and supporting their family farm, but housekeeping, which now included cleanliness and working outside the home to support the family, was creating even more work for these industrious immigrant women.⁵⁹

The young Polish women who came to the United States in search of economic opportunity typically married fellow Polish immigrants or first generation, American-born Poles,

⁵⁶ Harriet Block. "Changing Domestic Roles among Polish Immigrant Women." *Anthropological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1976): 3-10.

⁵⁷ Laura Anker. "Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940." 27

⁵⁸ Harriet Block. "Changing Domestic Roles among Polish Immigrant Women."): 3-10.

⁵⁹ Harzig, Christiane. 1997. *Peasant Maids - City Women: From the European Countryside to Urban America*. Cornell University Press.

and began to solidify the Polish American communities that centered around their Church parishes. Though these Polish women did not come to the United States with the primary goal of subverting gender norms, they were still part of this process. This, in addition to their traditional roles of mother and homemaker, was integral to the development of a new Polish American social norm and identity.

Gender Taught Through Food and Culture

The Polish immigrant women who inadvertently diverged from traditional gender roles also began to continue this divergence through how they raised their daughters. The first-generation Polish American daughters of Polish immigrants in Connecticut thus also had to navigate a convergence of Polish and American cultural norms when learning gender roles in the first half of the 20th century.⁶⁰ Helena taught her three daughters how to cook traditional foods, one of her daughters, continued the tradition, teaching her two nieces in turn how to cook traditional Polish foods. Helena thus used food to transmit ethnic identity to her daughters, the next generation of women in this first-generation Polish American family.

These first-generation Polish American women were born from around 1910-1930 to Polish immigrant parents who came to Connecticut in the first few decades of the 20th century. Helen Awrajcewicz, who was born in America, illustrates the impact of gender on her life. Her views about Polish culture and ethnic identity are rooted in gender codes that are found within the household and are often synonymous with the territory of women.⁶¹ Historians have shown how daughters retain their ethnic identity through their identification with culture from inside the

⁶⁰ Joseph Dulka, "People's Polish." 1.

⁶¹ Helen Awrajcewicz, "People's Polish". 1.

home.⁶² Lori Matten’s examination of Polish American families in Chicago shows that Polish immigrant women taught gender and culture to their American-born daughters.⁶³ She discusses a central problem for Polish American families - the tension between families composed of Polish immigrant parents and American-born children - in the years between World War One and World War II. Families during this period, now no longer solely immigrants, but fitting into the category of “Polish Americans”, were striving to retain their culture and ethnic identity while trying to pass it on to their children, whom they saw as modernizing and becoming almost too Americanized.⁶⁴

Though the families Matten analyzes belong to the Polonia community in Chicago, the issues of cultural tension apply to other Polish communities throughout the United States, especially in the Northeast and cities such as New Haven, which had dense and well supported Polish communities as in Chicago.⁶⁵ Thus, Polish parents, and mothers in particular, worked to create a home life in which Polish culture and ethnic belonging was passed down to their children through food and language. This once again brought into the Polish American identity a clash between the traditions of the old country, and the life and societal realities of America.

* * * *

Food was a critical part of the continuous identification with an ethnic or cultural group, helping to define and connect people to their ethnic past. This was especially true for foods that

⁶² Lori A. Matten. “Scouting for Identity: Recruiting Daughters to Save the Traditional Polish Family During the Interwar Years.”: 5–36.

⁶³ Lori A. Matten. “Scouting for Identity: Recruiting Daughters to Save the Traditional Polish Family During the Interwar Years.” 5–36.

⁶⁴ Lori A. Matten. “Scouting for Identity: Recruiting Daughters to Save the Traditional Polish Family During the Interwar Years.” 5–36.

⁶⁵ Matten, Lori A. 2014. “Scouting for Identity: Recruiting Daughters to Save the Traditional Polish Family During the Interwar Years.” *Polish American Studies* 71 (1): 5–36.

were specific to certain holidays, as they help to preserve ethnic heritage along with a cultural affinity for a religious practice and tradition within the context of celebration. As Catholicism is religiously, historically and culturally important in Poland and for Polish immigrants, many Polish holidays and cultural traditions are intertwined with Roman Catholicism.⁶⁶ The foods that were used for daily nourishment, especially those fed to young children, were typically prepared by women as part of their work in the home. For Polish immigrant women during this time period, the act of preparing food to nurture their families went hand-in-hand with the preservation of their Polish cultural and identity as they fed their families in the early 20th century.⁶⁷

Helena used food as a central marker of her Polish identity, and its importance to her household and family traditions has been passed down through the generations in her family. The Polish dishes she fed her family, including pierogi, a Polish dumpling, kielbasa, a type of Polish sausage, and a peasant-style, thin black bread and pickled herring, illustrate the ways that her traditional Polish foods helped her family survive the harsh economic circumstances of the Great Depression. “We always had something to eat,” said her youngest son. “There was always a thick stew, with vegetables and meat. My mother fed anyone who needed food, and in those times, there were a lot of people who needed food.”

As the older Mazan boys started to contribute more to the family finances, Helena could afford to buy the ingredients for more expensive traditional foods- golabki, or stuffed cabbage rolls, fragrant chicken soup, blueberry nalesniki, and pike cooked with fresh dill. And there were mushrooms - Helena never lost this Polish obsession and her son describes being brought out to the rural areas of East Haven on the trolley on the weekends to go mushroom picking. “My

⁶⁶ Harriet Block "Changing Domestic Roles among Polish Immigrant Women.": 3-10.

⁶⁷ Harriet Block, "Changing Domestic Roles among Polish Immigrant Women.": 3-10.

mother and the other women would take us with them. We'd have baskets and my mother would know which mushrooms were good and which ones could kill you. They knew these things, but they never taught us. We were just there so we didn't get in trouble. You couldn't just go to the grocery store and buy mushrooms like that back then. My mother didn't use a lot of words to describe things. She just said, 'this is what we did back home.'" Though outwardly Helena and her children were focused on assimilation, their Polish identity was fostered within the household at the dining room table. Her children forged their paths as Americans, while preserving the culinary traditions of their Polish roots.

The cultural Historian Helen Stankiewicz Zand's definitive "Polish Foodways in America" is a 1957 examination of how Polish foods and consequently traditions had passed into living cultural memories of the generations of Polish Americans after their parents who came to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Zand shows how food is a primary transmitter of culture, and how Polish food was used to transcend the generations of Americanized Polish Americans, beyond that even of language. The women in New Haven, whose children were American born and intent on belonging in their communities, still continued their Polish heritage through the remembrance and personal importance placed on the foods their mothers made them.⁶⁸

In many of the oral histories gathered throughout Connecticut from the 1960s through the 1980s, the now middle-aged and elderly participants identified with their Polish identity largely through the cultural identification that was passed down to them by their mothers, and oftentimes through the Polish food that they ate, especially at important Polish Catholic holidays such as

⁶⁸ Bloch, Harriet. "Changing Domestic Roles among Polish Immigrant Women." *Anthropological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (1976): 3-10. Accessed January 16, 2021. doi:10.2307/3316834.

Christmas and Easter.⁶⁹ These interviewees mark their Polish heritage much in the same way that Helena's children did - through the foods they identified through their mother as being Polish. The historian Mary Erdmans, who studies Polish American identity and culture, has also highlighted the importance of food in cultural connection to Polish identity, and the corresponding notices of gender that come along with that.⁷⁰ In her family history, "The Grasiński Girls," Erdmans recounts the importance of gender in her family's cultural attachment to Poland, after three generations of her family residing in the United States.⁷¹ Her family's history revolves around her mother and aunts, all of whom were the second generation of family members, being born in the United States, but all of whom still shared a strong cultural and ethnic attachment to Poland and who self-identified as Polish Americans.⁷²

The Grasiński sisters also noted the recipes and views around food that their mother taught them, and which they also used to identify themselves as Polish Americans. Traditional foods were remembered by the sisters as having been central in their childhood, and they associated their mother's Polish identity with her ability to create these dishes for them as children. The participants in the Connecticut oral history projects, from first-generation Polish immigrant parents who came to Connecticut in the first few decades of the 20th century, also show the importance of Polish food and its connection to Polish identity.⁷³ Nineteen-year-old Helen Awrajcewicz, for example, explained that "in my home we have Polish and American foods. We celebrate all Polish religious holidays. I enjoy the Polish customs very much."⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Mary Patrice Erdmans, "The Grasiński Girls". 53

⁷⁰ Mary Patrice Erdmans, "The Grasiński Girls". 57

⁷¹ Mary Patrice Erdmans, "The Grasiński Girls". 57

⁷² Mary Patrice Erdmans, "The Grasiński Girls". 63

⁷⁴ Helen Awrajcewicz, "People's Polish." 1-2.

Awrajcewicz's immediate identification of a dual cultural identity, through the medium of food, shows how central Polish food was to her identity, and that it was strongly passed down to her through her Polish immigrant mother who was in charge of feeding her family. Though Awrajcewicz highlights the centrality of food for her identification of Polish culture, she also interestingly includes "American" food as well. This shows a development of the first generation of American-born Poles into Polish Americans, a truly dualistic identity.

American-born sons of Polish immigrants also held on to their Polish identities with the traditions of food that their mothers passed down to them. Richard Mokrzyński, who married a first-generation American Pole, Nelle Chmura, states that "The only old-world customs that we observe now are Christmas Eve dinner and some of the religious customs, especially our name day."⁷⁵ For this Polish American couple, the celebration of religious holidays was marked by the ethnic food traditions that accompanied them. This is a similar pattern to that of Helena's children as well; though only one of her children, a son, had children, he still instilled in them Polish traditions revolving around the food of religious holidays and celebrations, combining the ethnic and cultural traditions that he had learned through his mother and passing them down to his own children, as his wife learned the traditional recipes through her mother-in-law, Helena.

Helena sought to raise her American born children so that they didn't face the same scarcity she dealt with as a child. Though her children came of age during the Great Depression, she sought to nourish and support them in the way she knew how - by ensuring that they had the hearty Polish food she knew how to cook. In addition to providing economically for her family, she made sure her children had the dense, carbohydrate-rich food needed to last them throughout the day. As her children assimilated to American society in public, they continued their tradition

⁷⁵ Richard Mokrzyński "People's Polish", Ethnic Heritage Project, University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections, Center for Oral History Interviews Collection. 5.

of Polish food inside the home into their adult lives. Though food is not the sole marker of ethnic belonging, it was used within the Mazan family to solidify Polish identity while also becoming fully Americanized. It is in this way that Helena used the hallmark of motherhood and domesticity- food- to reinforce tradition and ethnic belonging into her children, who while identifying fully as Americans who were born in America, still also held onto the dualistic nature of their Polish American upbringing. Because Helena as the mother was using her knowledge and tradition of Polish food to feed her children, she was unconsciously also helping to tie her children to the Polonia diaspora and greater Polish American community.

The Grasinski girls' identification with Poland was largely rooted in their homelife and the lessons they learned from their mother. Many of the cultural markers that they associated with Poland, and used to identify themselves as Polish American, were rooted in traditional domesticity. The Grasinski girls explicitly spoke of the housekeeping and cooking done by their Polish grandmother, as being important markers of Polish cultural tradition. These were passed down to their mother and then to the girls themselves, as practices that they continued into adulthood and that marked them as Polish. Though cooking and housekeeping are almost universally seen as gendered activities, for the Grasinski girls, these housekeeping activities were irrevocably tied to their Polish identity. Values such as cleanliness and the importance of a neat and orderly home remained important and stood out to these women as a marker of their Polish identity.

Language and Development of a Dual Identity

While speaking English was a crucial milestone of assimilation, speaking Polish remained a ke part of Polish American identity. Language is an important of cultural identity and

ethnic belonging for immigrant groups throughout the United States. Much of the research about Polish immigrants and the Polish language in America centers around the Polish-language parish, and the community that developed within it.⁷⁶ Yet, it is crucial to also add to this examination of language the ways in which mothers transmitted Polish ethnic belonging through speaking Polish in the home. Through understanding how Polish immigrant mothers communicated with their children in Polish, an extra dimension is added to the study of language and cultural identification in Polish American communities.

Helena learned to speak English, but she had a thick, distinct Polish accent and she never attained true fluency in English. Helena acquired her limited English skills by working in a dress factory during her first years in Connecticut. Working and talking with her co-workers from a variety of backgrounds, her English echoed that of immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe. She spoke with a signature inability to pronounce the “th” sound, pronouncing common words like “think” instead without the “h”, like “tink”. Though literate enough in her native Polish to be able to make her way through the Bible, Helena never became fully literate in English. Because of this, Helena often relied on her children to read newspapers and legal documents for her. Her literacy finally improved significantly when one of her two daughters-in-law, a schoolteacher, gave her a Polish-English bible after overhearing her say that she was embarrassed to speak English so badly when she was around her grandchildren. However, this improvement was not made until well into her 60s, after making her way through American society without these literacy skills. Though the goal of Helena’s literacy was to be able to read the Bible and speak better English around her American granddaughters, she instilled in her children the importance of education and a passion for reading.

⁷⁶ Thomas I Monzell.. "The Catholic Church and the Americanization of the Polish Immigrant." 1-15.

Helena's awkward and halting English instantly marked her as an immigrant and made her a target of hostility and xenophobic ridicule outside the boundaries of the immigrant-dominated working-class community of New Haven. Her children, on the other hand, learned English in primary school, and spoke without a Polish accent. Helena taught her children the importance of assimilation, with her children speaking Polish at home, and English outside in public. Helena's youngest son, Raymond, remembered that the instant he and his brothers crossed the threshold of their tenement door into their household, they switched mid-sentence from English to Polish, and when they crossed back over out of the house, from Polish to English. He remembers that not only was his mother adamant about her children speaking grammatically perfect English without an accent, but she also actively discouraged them from speaking Polish outside of the household in the general public, in order to fit in perfectly with their greater American community.

Though Helena demanded that her children speak Polish at home, she took pride in their ability to speak English and their success in school. Later in life, Helena was proud as she listened to her second eldest son, Frederick, win trivia game shows on the radio, and watched as one of her twins and youngest sons, Richard, push for teachers' unionization and historic preservation as a New Haven politician. First-generation Polish American Eva Hudak, for example remembered her childhood and the difference between her own fluent English and the halting speech of her parents.⁷⁷ These linguistic variances between the fluent, American-born children and the immigrant Polish parents were critical differences in the perception of identity and ethnic belonging for these American-born children.

⁷⁷ Eva Hudak, "People's Polish." 28.

However, the Mazan family spoke Polish at home. To Helena, it was not only easier, but it was also a way to help transmit cultural identification and belonging to her children within the private sphere. At home, Helena spoke to her children in Polish about her impoverished childhood, as well as the stories and traditions- and most passionately, about the religious traditions that she grew up with as a child in Galicia. Helena was not alone in sharing her past with her children at home. Olga S., an interviewee from the Ethic Studies, “Poles of New Haven” recounted a similar experience, “I was taught the Polish language by my mother...sometimes I was told stories of heroes of Poland, some history and fairy tales... I was very proud of being a Pole.”⁷⁸

In Polish American communities in Connecticut, the Polish-speaking Catholic church parish was a center for connecting the Polish-speaking community. This is shown explicitly in Eva Hudak’s interview, as she explains how the Polish language created a cultural marker despite her American identity. She says of her childhood in Connecticut, “...because then we were Americanized although we did speak Polish at home. And we went to the Polish church and services were in Polish for many years.” Eva Hudak thus gained her Polish identity through speaking Polish with her parents, as well as through being involved in the religious life of the Polish American community through the Roman Catholic Church it was centered around.

The importance of analyzing how Polish immigrant women used Polish in their female networks and with their children cannot be diminished. Though these communities of women within their greater Polish American communities were strong systems of support, they could also hinder women. Because these women were communicating solely in Polish, and only using these connections as a support system, it could at times prevent them from moving outside of the

⁷⁸ Olga Sowizdral, “Ethnic Studies, Poles of New Haven”, interviewed by Mary Bishop, 1939. Connecticut Polish American Archives, Central Connecticut State University. 5.

Polish American community. Because of this, it is possible that these communities that primarily used their ethnic language could at times stop women from venturing outside their community and the language they were comfortable in. Often, these women did not have the luxury of taking English language classes on top of working and raising a family, and thus missed out on the language acquisition that would be needed to truly assimilate into American society.⁷⁹

This was the case for Helena, who never formally learned English in a classroom setting. Despite this, her hunger for her children to have something more than she did drove her to push her children to succeed in school and to speak perfect English. Though Helena herself was never able to cross the barrier between being an immigrant and being an American who sounded like any other born and bred American on the street, her children did, and this became one of the defining successes of her life. Helena saw her children's fluency as a marker of success, as well as a marker of true assimilation. Because she herself was never able to lose her accent, she never lost her identification as an immigrant. By having her children speak grammatically correct English with an American accent, the assimilation that she herself could never attain was achieved by her children.

Oral histories from the first American-born generation of Polish Americans show that they felt a need to defend their mothers' lack of English skills. Many Polish immigrant women who came to the United States in the early 1900s, and raised children in the 1930s and 1940s, spoke Polish at home with their children, just as Helena did, and their awkwardness with the English language was obvious to their children. Monseigneur Louis Blecharczyk's oral history mirrors much of Helena's experience. He says, "Let me tell you something about my mother... my people, loyal as they were to the United States, they were too busy earning a living when

⁷⁹ Monseigneur Louis Blecharczyk, "People's Polish." 11.

they came here. When they came here, they had a family to support and to raise, house and feed. They did not have time to go to school.”⁸⁰ Though proud of his mother’s accomplishments, he still feels a need to defend her lack of English skills and explain why his primary language was Polish, even as an American-born citizen.⁸¹

Eva Hudak gives a nuanced analysis of her own development of her Polish American identity and Polish language abilities in her People’s Polish interview. Like Blecharczyk, she defends her mothers’ lack of English fluency, while also remarking on her newfound respect for her mother’s struggle as an adult and mother herself. “I remember when we were youngsters, I felt a little ashamed because my people couldn’t speak good English. I think the pressure was when we were going to school, and these mothers that were born here, naturally they spoke good English. But my mother never went to school, because she wouldn’t be able to get along. She didn’t fit. There were times that we were ashamed. But as we grew older, we appreciated what she did for us. And why she did it. And believe me, that foundation was laid to be used later... [in terms of] “identity,” “pride”, and “Polish values”.⁸² Hudak’s reflection came in part as a mother of two adopted children who didn’t speak Polish and developed as she worked as grandmother to teach her grandson Polish.⁸³ As an older woman, she understood and accepted the ways that her parents were able to instill in her a Polish cultural identity through language, while also accepting their difficulties in Americanization.

Left on her own, Helena raised her children in a household where only Polish was spoken, and children worked to support the family, both inside and outside the house regardless

⁸⁰ Monseigneur Louis Blecharczyk, “People’s Polish”, Ethnic Heritage Project, University of Connecticut Archives and Special Collections, Center for Oral History Interviews Collection.11.

⁸¹ Monseigneur Louis Blecharczyk, “People’s Polish.” 12.

⁸² Eva Hudak, “People’s Polish.” 28-29.

⁸³ Eva Hudak, “People’s Polish.” 29.

of gender. The Mazan family did this all while still maintaining a deep family tradition of a love of music and a deeply spiritual Polish Catholicism. Though her children were unusual, for their musical success and their deeply artistic inclinations, they were also a product of their Polish immigrant mother. Though often hiding their Polish identity in public, the moment they entered each other's households, the culture that had passed down to them through Helena continued. Helena's push for her children's education and success consequently meant that she did not focus on her own personal education or language acquisition- much like Mrs. Bleharczyk, Mrs. Dulka, and Mrs. Y, but on the accomplishments of her children.

* * * *

The Polish immigrant women in the New Haven area who raised their American-born children in the same era as Helena, were typical products of their time, while also inadvertently subverting gender norms. By entering the workforce once married, they were participating in necessary economics outside of the household, even though that pushed against traditional Polish gender norms. Defying the norms of the times by being at the same time mothers and participants in the workforce out of necessity, Polish immigrant women in New Haven and throughout Connecticut were dual purveyors of family importance- contributing economically from outside the home, as well as ensuring that culture and tradition were passed down to their children at home.

Though raising their dual Polish American families, Polish mothers in cities such as New Haven confronted traditional gender norms as they strived to balance child-rearing at home with work outside. Though this was a physically and emotionally taxing role, Polish immigrant

mothers succeeded in their goals of child rearing and providing for their families. As they prepared traditional Polish meals, they connected their children to their cultural and ethnic backgrounds through traditional Polish foods. At the same time, while Polish was the primary language spoken within these homes, it is not remembered as a major marker of cultural identity for these American-born children of Poles. Thus, the female-led cultural connection of food, passed down from mothers to their children, becomes a central piece of importance for the development of a dual Polish and American identity of these children. In doing this crucial task of motherhood- feeding and nourishing their children- Polish immigrant mothers instilled in their American children a sense of identity and ethnic belonging through their food.

Chapter 3: Polish Women in American Society

As Helena raised her family in New Haven, she became part of a generation of Polish women who strived to embrace the ways of her new world while preserving the culture of her homeland. The Polish women who came to the United States in the early 1900s, and settled in industrial cities such as New Haven, played an important role in cultural and economic development in the United States. They joined the workforce out of economic necessity, and they joined local Polish church parishes and organizations in their quest for friendship and community. It was not long before they married and had children. As they raised their families, they once again faced the challenge of blending the old and the new, balancing two cultural forces at once. These women had to work outside the home to support their families, while simultaneously endeavoring to preserve their Polish identities within the home. This chapter will look at the women of Helena's generation as they confronted this challenge outside the home.

Because these women were striving to do a decent job as mothers, wives, and workers, they faced difficult challenges that arose from these opposing roles. Their precarious economic situation forced them to find work outside the home. Yet, they had to fulfill all of the usual requirements of being a wife and mother while also supporting and raising their American-born children, and at the same time instilling in them the Polish cultural identifiers that they were raised with. These women who were facing the challenges of raising children and working had already persevered through their solo immigration journeys.

Americans in the early 20th century adhered to the ideal of woman's place at home as wife, mother, and caretaker of the family. Polish women of Helena's generation shared these views, but the economic demands of their life forced them to work outside their home to support their families. Though by the 1930s working outside the home was more commonplace in the

United States, it was still an adjustment for many women. However, the stock market crash of 1929 and the decade-long Great Depression left many families in extreme poverty- even in successful industrial areas such as New Haven – and forced women who had been able to stay at home to find work outside to ensure their families’ survival. These harsh economic realities drove Polish women, now mothers taking care of households and children, back into the workforce in order to support and feed their children.

When speaking of why his mother went to work, Joseph Dulka says, simply “she had four children to raise”, and when asked by the interviewer whether or not other Polish women in their community were doing the same, he responds “probably was, but there isn’t any that I know of, just my mother.”⁸⁴ Oral histories such as Joseph Dulka’s as well as Polish American newspaper articles, show that in the Polish American community, it was accepted that women would have to work outside the home to earn money for the family, but it still was not considered the norm. While it may not have been their ultimate goal, Polish women accommodated to this economic reality and went to work, all the while fulfilling their responsibilities as wives and mothers. They found support in this endeavor through their friendships with other Polish women.

⁸⁴ Joseph Dulka, “People’s Polish”. 8-9.

Outside the Home and in the Workforce

By the fall of 1929, Helena had six boys between the ages of twelve years and eight months. Her husband was an alcoholic who provided little economic or emotional support to the family. Forced to find work in the early days of the Great Depression, Helena's work cleaning offices at Yale University and other buildings throughout the city was much like the housekeeping tasks she did at home. Thus, during the 1930s Helena worked two, full time jobs- she earned money cleaning in New Haven's office buildings, while doing the same work at home for her family. As the sole provider of her family, Helena was indispensable to her family. Editorials from *Dziennik Zjednoczenia*, a national Polish American newspaper published in Chicago, show that throughout American Polish communities, the presence of wives and mothers in the workforce was becoming a more commonplace reality than previously thought.⁸⁵ Yet many in the Polish American community were concerned. Though this was due to great economic necessity, it was still a phenomenon that was clearly noticed and was the subject of discussion within the Polish American community.

New Haven was not spared from the economic disaster of the Great Depression. In this town with a deep industrial history, factories were shuttered and the city that had been so attractive to many immigrants quickly became a city of poverty. For Helena, the Great Depression was a traumatic period- a time not only of economic and political tumult for all Americans, but also the point at which her husband deserted the family for good.

Laura Anker, in her analysis of New Haven immigrant women, writes repeatedly of the constant theme underlying the women's oral histories- that of the necessity of their families' economic survival. The socio-economic situation that they left in Europe- where men worked in

⁸⁵ "The League of Polish Women" in *Dziennik Zjednoczenia*, http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423968_4_1202/

the farm or outside the home, and women took care of the household in a full-time capacity and participated in farm work- could not be replicated now that they were in America. Instead, women either continued their work from before their marriage, or found new ways to enter the workforce in order to support their families.⁸⁶ Anker writes that “The realities of low wages and irregular employment patterns required immigrant families to rely on the work of more than one household member in the United States, as they had in Europe.”⁸⁷ This is an overview of the reasons why Polish immigrant women, raising children while their husbands were at work, now were also working outside the home. This necessity drove these women - who had worked in factories or in other menial labor upon their initial arrival and through their early marriage - back into the workforce. In the depth of the Depression, many Polish immigrant women never had a time when they were traditional homemakers – instead, they worked throughout their marriage and early years of childbearing due to economic necessity.

Though the lack of her husband’s support and income that Helena experienced was not a typical occurrence, it was also strikingly familiar to John Dulka’s mother. Mrs. Dulka settled in Ansonia, near New Haven in the late 1910s where she raised her children. In 1928, her husband died, leaving her and her four young children to survive on their own. Like Helena, Mrs. Dulka found work as a cleaning lady, the only marketable skill she could use to provide for her children.⁸⁸ Her son recalled that after his father died, “My mother went out to work, housework, she did housework differences places each day of the week.”⁸⁹ With no car, Mrs. Dulka walked or took public transportation from job to job, and the word spread about Mrs. Dulka’s excellent

⁸⁶ Joseph, Dulka “People’s Polish”

⁸⁷ Laura Anker. “Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940.” 23–49.

⁸⁸ Helena Znaniecki Lopata. “Widowhood in Polonia.” *Polish American Studies* 34, no. 2 (1977): 7-25.

⁸⁹ Joseph, Dulka “People’s Polish”.

work throughout Ansonia. “Word gets around,” recalled her son. His mother was “honest, doesn’t steal, does good work; everyone else wants someone like that to do their work.”⁹⁰ Like Helena, she was a model of the hard-working and resourceful Polish immigrant mothers who found ways to support their families in their new homeland.

Because of their circumstances, Helena and Mrs. Dulka joined the growing number of mothers in the workforce. Because of this, they became a generation of women who balanced both raising children and being the breadwinner of the family, defying conventional working class, immigrant expectations of a wife and mother working only in the home. Ironically, this is not something that they would have done willingly. Helena was often perplexed that her daughter-in-law chose to keep working as a teacher, even when the family didn’t depend on her income. Helena would have preferred to stay at home, yet the role of primary breadwinner was thrust upon her; she did not embrace it as a positive good. It was simply necessary.

Helena’s ambivalence about her situation reflected the debate in the Polish community about the appropriateness of women working outside of the home. The *Dziennik Zjednoczenia*, popularly known as the *Polish Union Daily*, and published by the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America in Chicago, addressed the issue.⁹¹ Its editorials conveyed the conflict married women like Helena and Mrs. Dulka confronted trying to balance their lives at home and in the workplace and in their daily lives. The *Polish Union Daily* featured many articles and editorials centered on ethnic, social, and political life for Polish Americans. The message of the editorials was less of a concrete opinion on the place of women, but more a commentary on the economic and social culture that forced Polish American mothers into the workforce. This showed that these new realities of working mothers were recognized by the greater Polish American community.

⁹⁰Joseph, Dulka “People’s Polish”

⁹¹ “Much Depends on Polish Women” *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy* http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423968_3_0185/

Though *Dziennik Zjednoczenia* was published in the major Polish American community surrounding Chicago, the paper, alongside other Polish American newspapers such as *Nowy Swiat*, *Ameryka*, and *Gwiazda Polarna*, was readily available in New Haven for the reading pleasure of the Polish American community there.⁹² This speaks to the ability of *Dziennik Zjednoczenia* to have a broad and influential viewership and alliance with Polish American communities throughout the United States.

An article titled “Married Women and Unemployment,” published in 1928, anticipated the pressures of the Great Depression, and answered the Polish community’s cultural resistance to women in the workplace with resounding support, as this was necessary for the survival of their families and children in the poverty-stricken United States. The article argued: “With the present unemployment situation becoming worse, people are objecting to married women taking the place of men. It is not wrong, if she seeks employment because of dire necessity; when her husband is unemployed or unable to earn enough to support the family. When urgencies of this kind arise, there is no alternative but to leave her domestic duties and seek employment. These abnormal conditions, in many cases, are caused by the high cost of living. We should admire a wife who has the courage to work and carry the financial burden so that her family can exist.”⁹³

Though predating the economic repercussions of 1929, the article voiced the sentiment of a community that saw women who were wives and mothers and actively part of the workforce as valiantly doing necessary work for their families' survival in a time of unprecedented need. The implication, of course, is that there should be no expectation that this aberrant lifestyle would continue.

⁹² Aj Ewnas, “The Polish Section of New Haven”. Connecticut Polish American Archives, Central Connecticut State University. 4.

⁹³ “Much Depends on Polish Women” *Dziennik Zwiqzkowy* http://flps.newberry.org/article/5423968_3_0185/

Gender Constraints on Working Mothers

Though it was an economic necessity for many Polish American mothers to enter the workforce, the situation created conflict. Polish immigrant women immediately came into contact with a clash of identities and their subsequent roles of economic involvement, in order to fulfill the goals of immigration, and also of developing a family as necessitated by cultural expectation. By the early 20th century, the United States saw a significant push on behalf of the newly emerging feminist movement for women to win the right to vote and to receive more equality in both the workforce and within home and society. While the women's movement towards suffrage and a movement away from gender roles did not touch the lives of most Polish women, their lives reflected the debate over woman's place at home and at work. A woman working outside the home, unless out of dire necessity, was still seen as diverging from social norms for middle- and upper-class women. In contrast to this ideal, working class and immigrant women like Helena and Mrs. Dulka worked to survive and to support their families, as women on the poorer spectrum of society always had to do.

However, both Polish and American cultural norms still set an expectation of having women avoid working outside of the home except in exceptional circumstances- and immigration and restarting a life in a new country was certainly an exceptional circumstance. Despite this necessity, working outside the home, especially after marriage, was still a new reality that Polish immigration women had to confront.⁹⁴ This is especially true for the large proportion of Polish immigrants who came from agricultural peasant backgrounds. For all but the very wealthy, farm families would not have been economically viable without the women who

⁹⁴ Mary Patrice Erdmans. "Gender and Family in Polish American Studies." *Polish American Studies* 77, no. 1 (2020): 29-37.

contributed vital assistance to the family farm, and even if the family were in financial need, it would have made no sense for a woman to work anywhere but on the family plot of land.

In the United States, Polish immigrant women quickly found that it was difficult to stay at home and contribute to the family's budget. Thus, the wife at home was forced to make the husband's salary last, while not having any active participation in making money as well. For Polish wives, raising children, running the home, and managing the household budget were viewed as part of their womanly duty, even as it was crucial to the family survival. In the United States, there was no family farm for immigrants who settled in industrialized urban areas, and thus the old structure of every family member contributing to the family's duty was put off balance. In order to attain a stronger position for themselves and their family's economic situation, Polish women often had to leave their houses and physically enter the workforce in order to contribute to the family's income.⁹⁵ While this made their life starkly different from their agricultural backgrounds in Poland, Polish women were still doing what needed to be done to support their family, albeit in a totally new manner.

Though Helena immediately began to work in a factory upon her arrival in the United States, she did not expect to continue working once she became a wife and mother. According to her son, though as a girl she did not envision a life as a cleaner for herself, Helena knew she had to work in order to support her children. However, economic circumstances- nine children, an economic global disaster, and an absent husband, necessitated that her work after her marriage. Though perhaps Helena's exact situation was unusual, it is similar in that Polish immigrant women became working mothers simply because they had to provide for their families.

⁹⁵ Mary Patrice Erdmans. "Gender and Family in Polish American Studies."): 29-37.

According to Laura Anker, in her review of WPA interviews of Polish and other immigrant women in New Haven, immediate work upon arrival to the United States was necessary for the young women immigrants, but once they were wives and mothers, and though expected not to work outside of the house, they still found ways to produce income wages in order to support their family in a difficult economic reality. As Anker explains: “Mothers tended to work, not when they had the most time on their hands, but rather when their income was most critical to family survival.”⁹⁶ These women, including Helena, were thus part of a generation of women who faced similar challenges to their gender expectations, as well as the socioeconomic realities they found themselves and their families in.

But, as Anker argues, once married with children, the Polish women from the WPA sought jobs outside of direct factory work in order to make ends meet for their families, thereby juggling their motherly duties with the need to provide additional incomes for their families. These Polish immigrant women had to translate their skills into ones which could be transformed into money-making skills which were valued within the American industrial economy. Anker writes that, “The main issues confronting immigrant mothers was how to maintain an economically viable family life. The elimination of home agricultural and craft production, available at least as a limited resource in Europe, made money the key to survival. But the conditions of paid female labor in the United States made it harder for mothers to combine domestic responsibilities and work tasks. Furthermore, they found that the hand skills they had learned and applied in Europe to earn income at home had lost their value in competition with

⁹⁶ Laura Anker. “Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940.” 23–49.

machine-made products.”⁹⁷ Subsequently, Polish immigrant women made use of their skills in other ways, performing traditional domestic tasks of women as housekeepers.

Thus, Polish immigrant women who arrived in the United States in the early 1900s, faced the challenge of being of economic centrality to the family, while also seeing a role reversal of how exactly this economic centrality worked. They were not alone. This rearrangement of gender roles was a prominent problem for many women from Eastern Europe, who had been separate but equal players within the family’s agricultural economic systems back in their rural homelands, and now found themselves unmoored in an unfamiliar economic environment. Anker argues that this necessity of women moving into the workforce, even after their marriage, was not fully a movement of the Polish immigrant wife and mother moving towards an industrial-working age identity, but instead a continuation of the conception of a mother having to nurture and sustain her family.

Polish immigrant women who moved to industrialized American cities such as New Haven found new ways to raise money, including taking in taking in boarders or doing sewing at home as ways for the Polish immigrant mother to sustain her American-born children.⁹⁸ By doing this, women who didn’t have the ability to physically leave their houses to work like Helena did were still able to contribute to their family’s income. Anker describes the Polish immigrant women from the WPA interviews as engaging in work as domestic servants and cleaners as well as taking in boarders into their own homes. Women were thus becoming even more resourceful than ever as circumstances necessitated this.

⁹⁷ Laura Anker. “Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940.” 23–49.

⁹⁸ Laura Anker. “Women, Work & Family: Polish, Italian and Eastern European Immigrants in Industrial Connecticut, 1890-1940.” 23–49.

Not all immigrant women earned money in the same ways. Historian Virginia Yawns McLaughlin has shown that Italian immigrant women, for example, who came from families with stricter gender norms, faced resistance to working outside the home where they might encounter unfamiliar men.⁹⁹ Yet Anker writes that the first step for Polish and other immigrant mothers in 1930s Connecticut was to look to the skill sets that they had, in cooking, cleaning and sewing, to attain economic viability for their families before looking truly outside the sphere of the household and to factory work.

Such was the case with Joseph Dulka's Polish mother, who, after the early death of her husband in 1928 had to find work to support her young children. Dulka's parents had been born in the 1890s in Poland, and came to the United States prior to 1914, when his mother was in her late teens- the same age that Helena was when came to the United States. Mrs. Dulka's direct involvement in earning money for her family was thus one of necessity- out of losing the male provider. This recounting of his family's history thus follows the trend and expectations of a mother engaging in economic activity outside of the home in order to sustain her family, and not for a sense of need to belong to the economic community or out of desire for self-fulfillment, but out of duty and commitment to the needs of her family.¹⁰⁰

It is clear that if the family's economic situation improved, Mrs. Dulka would have left this work. The realities of life that Mrs. Dulka faced were not unique to Polish immigrant women, but were in fact the realities that working-class and immigrant women from all backgrounds faced in the United States, against a backdrop of increased industrialization and the increasingly financially competitive world they lived in. Because it was necessary for Mrs.

⁹⁹ Virginia Yawns McLaughlin, "Patterns of Work and Family Organization: Buffalo's Italians." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2, no. 2 (1971): 299-314.

¹⁰⁰ Helena Znaniecki Lopata, "Widowhood in Polonia." *Polish American Studies* 34, no. 2 (1977): 7-25.

Dulka to work, she, and many Polish American women like her, redefined the ways in which Polish women could be mothers in America at this time.

Beyond simply wife and mother, both Mrs. Dulka and Helena were the sole parental figure in their families, and it was through them that not only culture and tradition were passed down, but so were all aspects of parental guidance. Because they were the matriarchs of their households lacking husbands and fathers, their parental influence was essential in their children's lives. It was unusual at that time, and considered suboptimal, to have a female-led household with a single mother – but these two women succeeded. Combining the roles of breadwinner and mother, they had to combat the conflicting expectations and needs for Polish women in Connecticut during this period.¹⁰¹ Polish women who were unusual in their solo immigrations continued on a path that deviated from the traditional one by working outside the home after marriage. Though perhaps the trend of solo female immigration was unique to the Polish women of this period, their transition to American life by beginning work in factories in urban areas, was also a common occurrence.

Polish Women's Involvement in Polish American Communities

Over time, these same women became central members of these very communities and played important roles in helping a new generation of Polish immigrant parents negotiate the demands of assimilating into American way of life. They had to find a way to exist with American-born children, family structures that straddled the in-between place of development from Polish immigrants to America, and Polish Americans.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹Helena Znaniecki Lopata, "Widowhood in Polonia." 7-25.

¹⁰²John J. Bukowczyk, *Polish Americans and Their History: Community, Culture, and Politics*

The Polish-American historian John Bukowczyk wrote extensively on the development of a Polish American identity, with a transition between the self-identification of being a Polish immigrant, to an American of Polish descent, to the development of a true Polish American identity, from the 1930s through the 1950s and 1960s. Historian Stanislaus A. Blejwas, another preeminent historian of Polish Americans, links this identification and community strongly with the Catholic parishes which the communities grew around. This generation of Polish Americans developed in a dualistic culture between Polish American communities and the rest of American society. This is something examined extensively by Blejwas who has written that “Polish peasant villagers who reached New England stamped their presence into the landscape. New England communities, like those of Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, or other major centers of Polish settlement, organized around a parish church, the parochial school.”¹⁰³

Women played an important role in cultivating this role of the church. Personal accounts show that women were essential to the community that was formed around their Catholic parishes, by involving themselves in fundraisers, ethnic celebrations and frequent churchgoing. Anna Sangailo, a Polish immigrant in Connecticut, described an experience that reflected the behind-the-scenes involvement typical of women like her. “I helped the church,” she explained. “When they would have a bazaar, I would bake, I would make some food dishes for the church.” She connected her participation, rooted in traditional domestic tasks, to the rhythms of religious life that reached back to in Poland.¹⁰⁴ “On Sunday in Poland,” she recalled, “all the mothers and children are very happy. They all marched to church. There were long walks and everyone met each other along the way or coming back from church and it was very friendly. Over here, the

¹⁰³ Stanislaus A. Blejwas *St. Stanislaus B. & M. Parish, Meriden, Connecticut: A Century of Connecticut Polonia, 1891-1991*. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Anna Sangailo, “People’s Polish”

church religion is just as strong as it is in Poland...”¹⁰⁵ Sangailo thus equates the strength and community of women’s connections in Connecticut with that of the close female bonding surrounding the church and religious life in Poland.

For Helena, the same Polish American community that first helped her in Derby and New Haven, was the Polish American community that she raised her children in.¹⁰⁶ Though she was one of many siblings, only one of her sisters made her way to the same area of Connecticut, and their relationship was not strong enough to rely on one another for support. Consequently, she turned to her Polish American community, and specifically, the Polish American women in that community. Like Mrs. Dulka, Helena used the Polish community to help her find work as a cleaning lady. Through connections within the Polish American community of Ansonia, after the death of her husband, Dulka’s mother was able to support her family through working as a cleaning lady. She was able to find work through word-of-mouth recommendations that passed between members of the Polish American community there.

Helena used the Polish Catholic church parish of St. Stanislaus as a system and center of support. At times, the parish provided financial aid to Helena and her children, as it did to other needy parish members. But beyond that, it was the community of women surrounding Helena that helped to support her connection to her ethnic and religious identity, as well as to help ensure that she was able to have the means and support to raise her family. The church parish was a physical connector that brought people close together in order to be a part of the community. Physical proximity to each other, living in such places as the “Polish section”

¹⁰⁵ Anna Sangailo, “People’s Polish”

¹⁰⁶ Christine Gauvreau, “Polish Immigrant Lives in Connecticut, 1909-1922”, last modified May 26, 2016, <https://ctdigitalnewspaperproject.org/2016/05/polish-immigrant-lives-in-connecticut-1909-1922/>

enabled women like Helena and Dulka's mother to have access to support and community.¹⁰⁷

The physical proximity enabled women to not only use the community for support, but through its usage, to create an even stronger community through close female bonds of support. Eva Hudak recalls in her interview Polish women coming together around their Catholic church parish, while also interestingly noting that for her family, this connection to the church even transcended Polish identity for the women in her community.

The Church community enabled women like Helena to balance work and motherhood. The community of women, and the parish as a whole, enabled women like Helena to seek support and guidance when needed, and enabled Helena to form a community that enabled her to leave her children with other women when necessary in order to go to work. Though Helena found conflict with some of the teachings regarding gender and women's roles in the household, the community of fellow immigrant Poles was still a necessary part of her life.

Polish Women Outside the Norms

One of many Polish immigrants in New Haven in the 1910s, Helena came to the United States as a young woman who could not speak English, but quickly began to push the boundaries of acceptable womanhood in her community. Coming from a country where her ethnic and cultural identity were suppressed, she began to engage in political action. She marched in protests for a woman's right to vote. Though Helena would never have called herself a feminist, her involvement in her push for equality, and her determination for her daughters to have a better future than she did, marks her as an unusual woman. This unconventional nature of hers, combined with her emphasis on education, makes Helena an interesting addition to the histories

¹⁰⁷ Joseph Dulka "People's Polish". 10.

of contemporary Polish immigrant women with a similar background. Her fortitude and independent nature helped to secure the survival of her family, despite the fact that she was the only one within her family making a steady income until her eldest children began to work in their early teens in the late 1920s. However, Helena was not simply raising her children for survival- she was raising them with the goal of also passing down her family's love and heritage of music, and her extra nights of work were also able to pay for music lessons in piano, violin and viola for all of her children.

Literate in Polish, though not in English, she ensured that all of her children were fluent readers and writers of the English language, and that they excelled in school, music, and sports. Helena did this by instilling in them the importance of English fluency, and through utilizing each and every learning opportunity she could find through the New Haven public schools. No funds were wasted in their household, and every extra cent went towards giving her children the academic, musical and athletic opportunities Helena saw as paramount to the formation of a strong American identity. Her eldest son, Paul, had to leave school to help support the family in the depth of the Depression, nonetheless, he eventually rose to become a manager in the steel factory where he worked. The other eight siblings all went to college on academic scholarships, and all ended up working as professionals, with most of them becoming teachers and guidance counselors in the Connecticut public school system. However, only two out of her nine children married, unusual for a family with a strong Catholic tradition in an era that encouraged marriage and family life.

In this way, the trajectories of Helena's children were different from others raised by Polish parents. Anna Sangailo's spoke proudly of her children, who she said "talk pretty good

English”¹⁰⁸ and they maintained their Polish Catholic heritage, even though they did not marry partners with Polish roots. Though Anna Sangailo’s children married ethnic immigrants outside of their Polish American community, the emphasis within their family was on marriage. This emphasis on marriage was notably absent from the Mazan children’s’ upbringing. Neither Helena nor her children would ever talk about this - but it may be that as with so many broken families, matrimony did not necessarily seem attractive to the grown children. Perhaps because they saw their mother succeeding alone in a world that was not set out for women of her time to do so, they thus inherited her drive for a more independent, yet solitary lifestyle.

For Sangailo, and other interviewees such as Helen Awrajcewicz, the continuation of a Polish American identity through marriage was of clear importance- they saw Polish identity connected to both the language and the physical presence of the Polish Roman Catholic churches around which they centered their communities. Helen Awrajcewicz says, “if I have a family I would like them to observe some Polish traditions.”¹⁰⁹ Helena also relied on the Polish community to advance a dualistic Polish American identity for her children, and as a means of support. At the same time, however, she saw the Polish American community as a community that could still hold people back, especially women. She saw its social views, especially on motherhood, to be constricting for women in America. Helena, though a devout Catholic, at times held views on marriage and gender that conflicted with most of the members of St. Stanislaus parish.

Because Helena had enabled her family’s stability through work as the sole provider and parental figure, she disagreed with the messages from her church about the superiority of men,

¹⁰⁸Anna Sangailo, “People’s Polish”. 6.

¹⁰⁹ Helen Awrajcewicz “People’s Polish”. 2.

and their pre-eminence in society. She vehemently opposed her priest – a difficult thing for a Polish immigrant woman to do – when he suggested that her daughters should stay home and get married instead of going to college. Helena’s moral influence as a mother thus won out, as her daughters all became university graduates, yet never married.

Though Helena made use of her woman’s network for survival, she did not pass those values of conventional domesticity on to her daughters- she wanted them to focus on their education, specifically on going to college, not just getting married. This was starkly different from other families, such as Eva Hudak’s. When the interviewer asks Hudak her educational background, she explains “Well, now, see, I was about the fifth child, and you know in those days they believed in educating the sons. Not the daughters”, contrasting explicitly the educational push that Helena placed on her daughters.¹¹⁰ Hudak also remembers her parents’ insistence that she hopefully marry another Pole, but if not, still to marry- showing that the emphasis in their family for their daughters to marry was greater than for their daughters to have higher level education.

Though Hudak remembers her mother as somehow being literate in Polish, that did not extend to her emphasizing education for her American-born daughters.¹¹¹ This was diametrically different to Helena, who had approximately the same level of education as Hudak’s mother yet saw a different opportunity and potential futures for her daughters.¹¹² For Helena, upward mobility was best found through education for all her children, and not just through marriage for her daughters. Indeed, all three of her daughters graduated from college and had professional careers, yet none married. This speaks to the unusual quality of Helena’s child rearing: though it

¹¹⁰ Eva Hudak, “People’s Polish”. 7.

¹¹¹ Eva Hudak, “People’s Polish”. 13. Hudak did not graduate high school.

¹¹² Eva Hudak, “People’s Polish”. 6.

fell into the categories of certain norms within the Polish American community, it also deviated enough so that her children did not take traditional paths set out for them by cultural expectation. Though unusual, she and her children were still a product of her heritage and her immigration process, and straddled the world of two cultures, identities, and languages. Polish immigrant women used the physical community surrounding the Church to form community and gain support. By doing this, women not only helped themselves, but were part of the creation of the Polish American community, especially the ethnic and cultural sentiments that were developed inside the home. Because of their community, these women were able to change in the midst of the growing economic demands of the era.

Polish women who were part of a trend in their solo immigration journeys to the United States continued their unusual journeys as mothers raising American born children and also working outside the home and harnessing community support to enable this. Though Helena did not plan on working outside of the home after having children, life's circumstances necessitated that she did. By relying on the support of other women in her community to sometimes take care of her youngest children while she was working, Helena was able to be the main contributor to her family's income in the face of an absent husband. Products of both economic and social reality, they were able to use their deeply embedded cultural communities in order to support new means of taking care of their children and families outside of the home. Because of these necessary circumstances, Polish women in New Haven and across Connecticut set pathways that embraced both new directions as well as continuity with past for themselves and their families. At the heart of this journey was the community of women whose shared early immigration and Americanization experiences enabled their support and commitment to each other.

Conclusion

Helena Tokarz's story of immigration to Connecticut in the early years of the 20th century fit within the immigration trends of other young Polish women. However, this trend, of young, unmarried women immigrating alone, was also an unusual one. However, these young women relied on familial relations and the support of other Polish immigrant women and quickly made lives for themselves in Connecticut. This background enabled Helena, who was effectively a single mother of nine children, to succeed as mother and breadwinner, while also teach Polish cultural identity to her children. This necessary independence was transmitted to Helena's daughters in their search for education rather than marriage, and in her participation in political protest. Helena did not have many opportunities in life, but the ones she had- the chance to immigrate, her first job in a dress factory, and a job as a cleaning lady - enabled her to carve a path from a small village in Galicia to a full and successful life in the industrial urban center of New Haven. By tracing the lives and experiences of these women, this thesis contributes to the way that Polish immigrant women have been written about in the existing Polish American literature. As this thesis shows, Helena's remarkable approach to an ordinary life as well as illustrates trend of unusual young Polish women taking paths that deviated from the norms of the time.

The story of Helena and the thousands of young Polish women who immigrated to the United States in the 1910s in search of better lives is an important, though often overlooked narrative that is integral to Polish American history. The young Polish women who immigrated during this time are critical to the development of the Polish American identity in Connecticut. Their stories help to create a fuller narrative of Polish American history. By examining the individual stories of these women and Helena, this thesis shows the individual struggles and

challenges these women faced, set against the backdrop of many shared experiences and difficulties. This thesis examined the ways in which Polish immigrant women forged their own pathways and stories through narratives that belong as part of the overall study of Polish American history.

The centrality of the immigration journey and the early steps of these women in the United States, especially in industrialized cities within Connecticut, is a cardinal point. Women like Helena came to the United States not as part of family groups, but instead as young, single women on their own, looking for economic opportunity in a new country. By using the connections that they developed in this process, they were able to find places to live and work in the United States. Not only did these connections bring them a chance at the economic opportunity they so hoped to find, but it gave them a way to quickly develop a community and identify with their new country. Working in industrialized factories did give these women the entryway into American economic society, but it was the community development within the Polish American community itself which so importantly facilitated the transition to living in America for these young women. Without the strong bonds formed through immigration, these young women would not have so easily created community bonds, and their entryway into the Polish American community would have been much harder.

The oral histories of these women, and the personal story of Helena, reveal the importance of female connections as women navigated the challenges of life in America. The individual voices of each narrative help to create a more personalized narrative of Polish women and the development of community and life in the United States. These women used family connections in order to become not just Polish immigrant women, but Polish immigrant women living, working, and participating in American life. The female bonds and community that these

women constructed would be an essential support for the rest of their lives. These female connections were crucial to their survival and success. Through using connections such as sisters and even more distant relatives, Polish women first were able to find means of economic survival in the United States, as well as solidifying an identity as Polish Americans.

However, Helena was also cognizant of the ways in which an ethnic community could come into conflict with the ideals of the modernizing 20th century and thus could stifle women. To Helena, these ideals could entrap her American-born daughters in a continued cycle of marriage and ethnic community centered around the Church. Though this was the very community she was a part of, and raised her children in, Helena did see the ways in which such a community could keep women from moving outside of the community in later generations. Though she gained tremendously from being a part of the Polish immigrant and Polish American communities, Helena's own insight can help to lend a critical eye to the ways in which women participated within these very communities. This thesis has shown the value of looking at the lives of individual women to better understand the nuances of life for Polish women in America in the early 20th century.

Memories such as Helena's and Eva's about education and gender speak to a reality of the time- that in their Polish American communities, education of daughters wasn't a necessary part of life, even when education of sons was used to help the family's circumstances. This shows how Helena subverted norms by ignoring this- as well as the pressures for marriage as echoed in Ann Sangailo's oral history - and instead emphasized education over marriage for her American-born daughters. Though she was a typical Polish American immigrant woman and mother, in terms of her work and participation in Polish Catholic life, her emphasis on education for her daughters set her apart from the mold.

Helena and Mrs. Dulka's similar stories, of a wife returning to work in the absence of a husband and main breadwinner for the family, show the ways in which traditional Polish American housewives were able to subvert social and cultural norms when necessary. Because both the women were raising many children on their own, they turned to cleaning houses, as a way to work and make money for their family, while also being able to raise their children and take care of their motherly duties. By swapping the factory work that they did before their marriage for housecleaning, the two women were able to work and be mothers at the same time. They were only able to do this, however, because of the support of their female community. As Helena's youngest son remarked, "I had a thousand aunts in the neighborhood. There was always someone to catch you before you did anything too bad." This community of women was thus a community that raised their children and created the pathway for them to succeed at American life.

Helena, Mrs. Dulka, Anna Sangailo, and Eva Hudak each forged her own path. These women all had shared ethnic and cultural backgrounds and were part of an extended ethnic and cultural community in the United States. However, each woman had distinctly different experiences as well, which serves to illustrate the individual challenges of everyday life as an immigrant woman. Yet, they had enough in common-- immigrating to Connecticut without their families, working in factories, and working throughout their marriages - that a clear connection can be drawn through their shared experiences. All of these women did whatever was necessary, despite social and cultural norms, to adapt to the economic and social realities of their time in order to ensure their own success, as well as their families' success in the United States. This thesis seeks to weave together the experiences of these women to expand the story of Polish

immigrant women in Connecticut. These oral histories help to add a more personal and female-focused narrative to the understanding of Polish American history.

The interpretation of oral histories of Polish immigrant women is a necessary part of the fabric of Polish American history. Although these women may not have been individual contributors to important historical events, they were nonetheless important to the development of identity and community within the Polish American community in Connecticut. As with many ethnic and cultural communities for a long period, women stayed within these communities and because they did not write about their own experiences, their voices were silent. Though their involvement may have primarily occupied the private sphere, it is no less necessary to the history of Polish immigrants in the United States. Theirs was the hard work of immigrating to the United States as young women, working outside of the home, and raising a family - work that is an under-appreciated piece of history. This thesis looks at individual women and their stories in order to examine this difficult work.

This thesis has examined the individual women's narratives and voices to shed new light on the ways in which culture and identity developed in the Polish American community. It focuses on the centrality of Polish immigrant women's stories, and how women used their connections and community to weather the long-lasting conflicts between old and new traditions. By casting a spotlight onto the details of these women's lives, this thesis worked to interpret and add to the body of literature surrounding the Polish American history, as a narrative focusing on the voice and stories of Polish immigrant women during a pivotal time in American history. The stories and voices of Helena and the women contemporary to her and her life are an important contribution to the story of Polish American history. A focus on women themselves, and their life stories, adds a depth and a personal character to the often-generalized overview of the study

of Polish American communities, and helps to create a connection between an analysis of women and Polish American history that is necessary for the existing historical narrative.

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