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The Heritage and Ancestral Roots of Polish Immigrants to Texas in the Second Wave

ABSTRACT

The article explores the second wave of Polish immigration to Southeast Texas during the 19th century, focusing on the cultural heritage of the Polish diaspora, particularly from Greater Poland and Galicia. It examines the foundational figures of the Polish ethnic community in Texas, including Meyer Levy, Father Feliks Orzechowski, and Josef Bartula. Utilizing content analysis of 4,358 pages across 124 volumes from the Polish Genealogical Society Texas (PGST), published between 1984 and 2021, the study reveals the significant contributions of these individuals – Jewish merchants, Catholic clergymen, and community leaders – to the history of Polish settlement in Texas. The article also underscores the impact of Polish immigrants on the state's agricultural development and their role in enriching the ethnically diverse fabric of Texas. Additionally, it highlights the crucial roles played by women and children in the early success of these immigrant communities.

KEYWORDS: Polonia, Texas, emigration, cultural heritage, identity

STRESZCZENIE

Korzenie a dziedzictwo kulturowe polskich emigrantów do Teksasu drugiej fali

Artykuł podejmuje tematykę drugiej fali osadnictwa polskiego w Teksasie w XIX w. Pogłębia wiedzę na temat dziedzictwa kulturowego ówczesnej Polonii, zwłaszcza emigracji z ziem polskich Wielkopolski i Galicji. Kładzie także podwaliny pod polską wspólnotę etniczną z jej ojcami założycielami: Meyerem Levym, księdzem Feliksem Orzechowskim i Josefem Bartulą. Przebadano 4358 stron, zebranych w 124 tomach Polskiego Towarzystwa

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Genealogicznego w Teksasie (PGST), które ukazywały się w latach 1984–2021. Materiał przebadano metodą analizy treści (*content analysis*). Ustalono, że żydowski kupiec, duchowni katoliccy i sołtys pozostawili trwały ślad w historii polskiego osadnictwa w Teksasie. Podkreśla się także wpływ polskich imigrantów na przemysł rolniczy państwa w drugiej połowie XIX w. i ich wkład w zróżnicowaną etnicznie tkankę Stanu Samotnej Gwiazdy. Rola kobiet i dzieci we wspólnym wysiłku na rzecz sukcesu kolonii jest również widoczna na samym początku istnienia tego społeczeństwa w Teksasie.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Polonia, Teksas, emigracja, dziedzictwo kulturowe, tożsamość

Polish Settlement in Southeast Texas

When discussing Polish emigration to the United States, cities like New York and Chicago often come to mind as the primary destinations for Polish immigrants. However, contrary to this common perception, Texas was the site of the first permanent Polish settlement in North America. Established in 1854, Panna Maria in Karnes County was founded by Polish emigrants from Opole Silesia, led by Father Leopold Moczygemba. He successfully encouraged his compatriots to follow the example of successful German settlers and start a new life in the region between San Antonio and Houston (Brożek, 1972, p. 247). Known as "the cradle of Polish culture in America" (Musialik-Chmiel, 2010, p. 108), Panna Maria has been the focus of extensive research both historically and in recent studies (Haiman, 1936; Baker, 1996; Moczygemba Watson, 1999; Warren et al., 2021; Robinson, 2023). Additionally, the 1850s saw the establishment of other Polish settlements in the United States, such as Polonia in Portage County, Wisconsin (Babiński, 2009, p. 329) and Parisville, Michigan, which may have been founded even before the Texas settlement (Bukowczyk, 2018, p. 19).

The origins and heritage of the second wave of Polish settlement in Texas remain largely unexplored. Recent research into this 1867 migration reveals that it was not directly influenced by Silesian origins but rather driven by individuals from other Polish regions, such as Greater Poland and Galicia (Bujak & Liszka, 2023, pp. 383–394). This wave of immigration was also activated by the changing socio-political climate in late 1860s Texas, which offered several attractive factors to potential settlers.

The arrival of Polish settlers in Southeast Texas is closely tied to the emancipation of enslaved African Americans and the subsequent changes of the postbellum era. The Reconstruction period, following the Civil War's end in 1865, brought significant social and economic shifts. Planters

in the lower Brazos and Colorado rivers faced the collapse of the slave plantation system, leading them to seek new labor solutions. Concerns about labor quality and scarcity, combined with racial and economic challenges, prompted farmers and planters to form private associations and societies to secure a new workforce (PGST, vol. XXXIII, no. 1, pp. 10–11; Kinsey, 1979).

Texas has a unique history within the Southern context, characterized by a longstanding tradition of welcoming foreign immigrants and embracing diverse cultures. This tradition of inclusivity significantly contributed to the state's ethnic diversity well before the Civil War. The influx of various ethnic groups infused vitality into Texas's agricultural sector, leading to the development of a thriving agricultural industry. The state actively encouraged immigration, particularly from Germany, recognizing the industrious and successful farming practices of German, Czech, and Polish settlers, who were often viewed as having superior work ethic and agricultural success compared to their Anglo-American counterparts (PGST, vol. XXXIII, no. 1, pp. 13–14; Baker, 1996; Jordan, 1966; Hudson & Maresh, 1934).

Additionally, the expansion of railroads in Texas played a crucial role in attracting immigrants. Railroad companies distributed brochures in Central Europe, highlighting the benefits of railroad lands and the fertility of Texan soil, appealing to immigrants' aspirations for land ownership and cultivation. The 1870s saw a surge in railroad construction, especially in East Texas, leading to the establishment of settlements around railroad stops. This development spurred the growth of agricultural enterprises such as stockyards, sawmills, gristmills, cotton gins, and cottonseed oil presses. The expansion of markets on a national scale further boosted the economy, ushering in a period of prosperity.

The Cradle of Polish Emigration to Southeast Texas. Waverly, 1867

Following the American Civil War, the South experienced significant changes that created new opportunities for labor acquisition. Virginia Felczak Hill's monograph, *Polish Emigrants to Texas: The Second Wave* (1991), provides an in-depth exploration of the early Polish immigration to Waverly, Southeast Texas, beginning in 1867. Her study is based on records from the Waverly Emigration Society meetings, detailed in the archival collection of John Hill. A successful Texas planter, Hill's papers, housed at the Briscoe Center for American History, include a wide range of documents such as correspondence, broadsides, receipts, financial records,

bonds, currency, legal documents, contracts, memoranda, and certificates (cf. Calvert, 1973, pp. 461–472). On September 19, 1866, in Waverly, Walker County, a significant meeting took place in the store of Polish immigrant Meyer Levy. This meeting, attended by John Hill and eleven other planters, focused on the feasibility of recruiting foreign laborers from Europe (cf. Baker, 1982, p. 62). C.T. Traylor served as chairman, and H.M. Elmore was the secretary. The attendees included Dr. Campbell, J.D. Cunningham, John Hardy, Robert Hardy, Col. John Hill, S.L. Kelsey, W.W. McGar, Thomas Nixen, J.M. Powell, and A.C. Traylor of Chappell Hill, Washington County (Felczak Hill, 1991, pp. 4–16).

James Meyer Levy, a Polish Jew born in 1832 in Exin (Kcynia), Prussian Poland, immigrated to the United States in 1848 as a cabin boy on a British merchant ship during the Greater Poland Uprising. Settling in Texas, Levy and his wife became known for their strong support of the Confederate cause. During the Civil War, Levy operated as a Union blockade runner and privateer, transporting cotton to the West Indies in exchange for weaponry and medical supplies (Baker, 1982, p. 61). After the war, he sold his vessel and used the proceeds to establish a store in Waverly (PGST, vol XI, no. 4, p. 3). Highly respected in the South for his business acumen and foreign background, Levy earned the trust of plantation owners. His deep understanding of the socio-political climate in partitioned Poland made him an ideal candidate for an immigration agent, promising to recruit new labor from his homeland.

The Waverly Emigration Society decided to invest in Levy's plan, swiftly finalizing the contract. Levy received an advance of $1,260 and was tasked with recruiting 173 foreign laborers, including 153 field hands and 20 specialty workers, such as washerwomen, ironers, cooks, house servants, yardmen, blacksmiths, carpenters, gardeners, and several foremen. The agreement stipulated that upon arrival in Texas, the laborers would work on cotton plantations in Walker County for three years.

Under the contract, male laborers were to be employed as indentured servants, receiving $90 in the first year, $100 in the second, and $110 in the third. Female laborers were to earn $20 less per year. The planters agreed to provide suitable housing and food. Laborers were responsible for the passage and food costs of their children. While transportation expenses were covered, laborers were required to repay the cost of their passage in three equal annual installments. Levy's plan was well structured. First, he sent advertising dispatches to the area of his Polish nativity; then he arrived to assemble the emigrants and make travel plans. He voyaged to his homeland and recruited people from his home village area: Kcynia, Panigródz, Chraplewo, Słupy, Smogulec, Szubin. On April 23, 1867, twenty-nine families arrived in Galveston, Texas from Hamburg, through Liverpool, and

the port of New York – the event observed in the Galveston Daily News with the mention that one hundred and ten emigrants had arrived (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 3, p. 15). By following the financial payments by plantations owners, the list of travel expenses, the 1870 census records of Walker and neighboring counties, naturalization records as well as genealogical research on the families, Felczak Hill (1991) attempts to sort and connect the facts to paint the most accurate picture of that journey and subsequent settlement. The assembly that Levy procured was certainly less in number than originally intended. His journey was longer than anticipated and not without mishaps as twelve immigrant families absconded and four single adults got lost in New York during the transition period of several days between transferring from *City of Antwerp* to the coastal streamer *C.W. Lord* to Galveston. Even hired policemen were unsuccessful in locating them[1] (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 4). The immigrant group of six single adults, 23 families including 14 children over working age of ten reached their destination in Waverly and signed the contracts on August 14, 1867. They were distributed among their landlords and scattered over Walker, Austin and Washington counties (PGST, vol. VI, no. 3, p. 14). Two planters received no workers and the others received far fewer than expected. Despite that miscalculation, Meyer Levy, per his granddaughter's account made three more trips to Poland recruit more laborers (Hill, 1991, p. 15).[2] Subsequently, the "Meyer Levy Poles" (PGST, vol. XXVIII, no. 1, p. 27) initiated the wave of organized emigration from the present-day provinces of Greater Poland and Kuyavia-Pomerania, and opened a new route of chain migration from Eastern Prussia Poland to Texas (cf. Praszałowicz, 2003, p. 77).

Waverly, established in 1867 in the Trinity River Basin, is considered the cradle of Polish immigration in Southeast Texas. Polish immigrants and their descendants played a significant cultural role in Walker County. Initially, they faced profound challenges and trepidations as they sought to establish themselves in a new cultural milieu. The triad of faith, family, and friends emerged as crucial pillars for their potential success.

1 Another account, according to local oral histories, is that Mr. Levy was forced to return to Europe from New York to recruit an entirely new group of Polish laborers because his original assembly had dispersed in New York and no one showed up to continue their travels to Texas (Baker ,1982, p. 63). John Hill's manuscript does not support that story.

2 In *Flake's Bulletin* dated August 3, 1867, a record denotes another immigration meeting conducted by the Waverly Immigration Society at Waverly at that time. The details are not provided, but one can learn that during this assembly, an official endorsement was granted for the recruitment of additional laborers from Poland. The members of the society proposed the inclusion of Polish laborers, emphasizing their commendable skills, as a beneficial measure for the overall prosperity of the state (PGST, vol. XXXII, no. 1, p. 14).

The early phase of their journey was marked by isolation, loneliness, and a sense of being adrift in an unfamiliar environment. The vast distances hindered easy contact and integration. The rural infrastructure of Waverly in the 1860s was poorly developed: there was no Catholic church in Walker County, no nearby tavern for social interaction, and few venues for immigrants to exchange information or share their experiences. The arduous transatlantic voyage not only depleted family resources but also left newcomers with meager personal belongings, often reduced to little more than a change of clothing.

Upon arrival, they confronted the harsh Texas sun, unfamiliar farming practices, new crops,[3] a predominantly Protestant cultural landscape, a foreign language, and the absence of familiar faith rituals from the Old World. These compounded challenges made the initial period especially difficult for the Polish immigrants.

In the agrarian context, success for Polish immigrants hinged on the collective efforts of the entire family unit, with each member contributing to the household economy. The challenges they faced were multifaceted, encompassing economic hardships, cultural clashes, the loss of familiar traditions, and the struggle to adapt to a new way of life. Their resilience rested on their ability to forge a cohesive and expansive structure for subsistence and to navigate the intricate web of challenges posed by their new surroundings. The farming duties of indentured servitude were varied and many. They required innovative solutions often involving entire families. Responsibility for farm work was of necessity often divided up and children and adults developed specialized skills in crop cultivation, livestock management and the maintenance of farm equipment.

An illustrative example is Martin Pawlak, one of nine children of Michael Pawlak who emigrated from Chraplewo with Meyer Levy. Martin was able to become an independent farmer thanks to the substantial manpower provided by his large family, which shared the burden of work and maintained a self-sustaining homestead. Martin and his first wife, Jadwiga Twardowski, had 12 children. After Jadwiga's death shortly following the birth of their last child, Blanche (Bolesława), Martin needed additional help to manage the household and rear his children, underscoring the critical role of family support in their survival and success. Two months after Jadwiga's death, Martin married Maria Nowak. This union produced five more children, bringing the total to 17 offspring, along with numerous

3 Early Polish immigrants to Texas had no previous experience with cotton or corn farming. That ignorance got reflected in the language terms they started using to describe Texas crops. Literally, Polish farmers had to invent new vocabulary to communicate their new reality: "wata" for cotton (*bawełna* in Polish), and "kłerna" for corn (*kukurydza* in Polish).

descendants who carried on Martin's legacy (PGST, vol. XXVII, no. 1, p. 16). Marrying a widow or widower and blending families was a common coping mechanism, if not a survival strategy, among Polish immigrants.

Each family member handled a diverse range of tasks at home, reflecting the operational demands of farms which required a wide spectrum of skills. These activities ranged from planting and harvesting to adept animal husbandry. Children, even from a preschool age, picked cotton, while girls contributed to maintaining the household by cooking, cleaning, washing, quilting, patching, and tending to younger siblings. Birth certificates were not required in Texas until 1903, so most babies were born at home with the assistance of family or trusted midwives such as Annie Malak or Tekla (Texana) Pawlicka (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 29; PGST, vol. X, no. 3, p. 22). This diversified skill set enabled family members to specialize in distinct tasks, enhancing overall operational efficiency.

Agriculture, as an occupation, is inherently exposed to numerous uncertainties, including inclement weather, crop failures, and livestock diseases. A larger family acted as a strategic mechanism for risk mitigation. During crises, the diversified skills of additional family members facilitated adaptability, task diversification, and collective strategizing for survival. It was not uncommon for a young teenage boy to quit school and take over the responsibilities of his farmer father in the event of an accident or sudden death in the family (PGST, vol. XXXV, no. 1, p. 14). Cotton gin accidents often killed or crippled grown and capable men before insurance policies became popular (PGST, vol. XIII, no. 2, p. 38), so the best protection for the family unit was training its successors.

This approach also inherently ensured a seamless, natural inheritance plan as farming enterprises often followed a generational trajectory. Children assimilated the requisite skills and knowledge, facilitating a smooth transition of responsibilities and guaranteeing the perpetuation and viability of the family farm. Bochnia's (Buckner) homestead consisting of 154,3 acres had been passed down to the next direct descendent through generations (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 41). The legacy of resilience and dedication lived on through the successors of families such as the Stetz (PGST, vol. XIV, no. 1, p. 43), Graczyk (PGST, vol. XIX, no. 3, p. 23), Laskowski/Gurka (PGST, vol. XIII, no. 2, p. 38), and Malinowski families (PGST, vol. XXVI, no. 2, p. 11). These families, along with many others, either inherited or purchased their family farms from their parents' estates, continuing the agricultural traditions established by their forebears.

The pressures of farm life for immigrants fostered an environment characterized by isolation and significant mental challenges. A strong and resilient family unit functioned as a vital social and emotional bulwark, offering critical emotional sustenance, companionship, and a shared sense

of purpose. This support system was essential in mitigating the psychological toll of agricultural toil and the nostalgia for their distant homeland.

From Family to Community – Roots in the Formation of Polish Texans

Meyer Levy played a significant role in bringing Polish immigrants to Southeast Texas, but he was neither the architect of the early Polish community formation nor the leader of early Catholic settlers. Prussian Poles emigrated not only to improve their well-being and financial situation but also to escape the oppressions of Bismarck's Kulturkampf and mandatory army conscription (Blanke, 1983, pp. 253–262). The systematic attempt to uproot Polish peasants from their land (Blanke, 1981, p. 75) culminated in the Colonization Act of 1886 by the Royal Prussian Colonization Commission (1886–1918) (Koehl, 1953, pp. 255–272). Many Prussian Poles, like the Graczyk family of Imielno, were displaced and saw no other choice but to sail to the United States (PGST, vol. XIX, no. 3, p. 21). Their dream of America included the desire to establish themselves in a new land while holding onto their Catholic faith, culture, heritage, and language, aiming not to "merely endure, but prevail" (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 5).

Faith was imperative for these immigrants. They found comfort, identity, and communal ties in their religious convictions. There was a desperate need for a missionary priest who would guide them spiritually, provide solace, perform Mass, and administer sacraments. When the Waverly Emigration Society immigrants arrived in Texas in 1867, yellow fever was raging inland (PGST, vol. XXIX, no. 1, p. 2). Anton Dutkiewicz, Andreas Kaminski, Valentin Muszynski, Simon Witucki, and Victor Wojciechowski, who sailed with Meyer Levy, died that year (PGST, vol. IX, no. 4, p. 42). In the Industry area, where some Poles lived and worked, Czech and German immigrants had migrated to Texas as members of the Stephen F. Austin colony. Father Joseph Chromcik of Fayetteville – a Czech, came once a month to celebrate Mass in various homes in the area (PGST, vol. XXVIII, no. 1, p. 10).

Although the presence of a Catholic priest was comforting, faith for many immigrants was intricately tied to their cultural and ethnic identities. Places of worship evolved into not just spiritual epicenters but also cultural nuclei, where immigrants could uphold and commemorate their distinctive identities through traditions and customs. The parish, with its church and parochial school, was a social and cultural unit – a center of the peasant's universe (Bujak & Liszka, 2023, pp. 383–394). Beyond his religious duties, the priest acted as a unifying community leader, legal

advisor, and advocate for the Polish immigrants. He served as an intermediary between the Polish community and the wider American society, helping immigrants navigate the challenges of adapting to a new country and offering guidance on matters related to employment, housing, and social integration. Often, he provided moral support, counseling, comfort, and assistance during times of hardship (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 29). It is no surprise that immigrants desired a Polish priest, rather than a German or Czech one, to lead their community.

The Role of Father Felix Orzechowski in the Polish Immigrant Narrative in Texas

Father Feliks Orzechowski, often known as Father Felix, was the first Polish missionary to arrive in Southeast Texas, playing a pivotal role in organizing and shaping the Polish immigrant community. As Polish immigration to Southeast Texas began, Father Felix emerged as a foundational figure, whose influence extended beyond the establishment of parishes. He was a cultural steward, ardently preserving and promoting Polish cultural identity, and a dedicated shepherd guiding his community through the challenges of assimilation.

Father Orzechowski's early years in Poland were marked by insurrectionist fervor deeply rooted in the quest for Polish national autonomy. Before he emigrated, he attended the seminary of Sandomierz (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 32). When the 1863 January Uprising began, together with other seminary alumni,[4] he joined the insurrectionist army.[5] After the fall of the Uprising, Father Felix evaded Russian repercussions by seeking refuge in the Austrian partition. He soon departed for France, where he was recruited by an American bishop of French descent for missionary work in Texas.[6] Having arrived in Galveston on All Saints Day in 1866

4 Rev. Szymon Wieczorek, a missionary priest in the northern states of the United Sates was a fellow seminarian and insurrectionist who, just like Father Orzechowski, temporarily joined Resurrectionist Order and committed his life to the development of Polish parishes e.g., St. Albertus in Detroit, MI (Kruszka, 1998, p. 21).

5 The participants in the January uprising were the Sandomierz seminary alumni: Kacper Strychalski, Tomasz Fusiarski, Michał Moller, Wincenty Cyrański, Szymon Wieczorek, Ignacy Myślakowski, Feliks Orzechowski, Wincenty Krasnoszelski, Feliks Kaca, Józef Kwiatkowski, Bolesław Sarnecki, Mikołaj Molecki, Julian Pryliński, Jan Gęca. Retrieved from: https://leliwa.pl/sandomierz-rok-1863-sandomierz-w-powstaniu-styczniowym-2/ (access: 10.12.2023).

6 Bishop Dubois showcased a remarkable ability to leverage his character and ecclesiastical position for the recruitment purpose (Kruszka, 1998, p. 293). His travels to Europe were perceived locally as a strategic opportunity to orchestrate measures essential for redirecting the course of

(Kruszka, 1998, p. 296) with Bishop Dubuis, he became the first Polish priest ordained in Texas on November 4, 1866 (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 32).[7]

Initially, Father Felix worked with the Silesian immigrants and served as the first resident priest at St. Hedwig. However, conflicts with Fr. Bakanowski, the superior of the Polish mission, and Fr. Zwiardowski, both members of the Resurrectionist Order, led to his expulsion to the underdeveloped "wilderness of Walker County," a region north of Houston, to work in the Czech-Polish mission (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 35; vol. XVIII, no. 2, p. 37; cf. Kruszka, 1998, p. 305).

Traveling on horseback due to the absence of roads, Father Felix endured significant hardships, often subsisting on meager provisions of hard cornbread and limited amounts of bacon, and sleeping on bare Ground under the open sky (Dworaczyk, 1936, p. 159). By October 1868, and likely earlier (Baker, 1982, p. 65), he was ministering to new immigrants on scattered farms in southern Walker County. Records from Houston's old Saint Vincent de Paul Catholic Church (now Annunciation Catholic Church) confirm that he baptized babies for the Wedell, Pawlak, Dabrowski, Cyrklewski, Suchowiak, Hajman, and Rybkowski families, with the possibility of additional baptisms for families without extant records.[8] The first

Polish emigration toward Texas. The proposition of local immigration proponents in Texas to enlist Bishop Dubuis in the immigration initiative stemmed from the recognition of his influential persona and authoritative standing, surpassing that of any remunerated agent. His declarations carried unquestionable weight, and were augmented by unrestricted access to the oppressed populations in Europe. There was a hope that Polish individuals scattered in France would settle in Texas – possibly a remnant of an idea presented by the Polish delegates Smoliński, Lenkiewicz, Bujnicki, and Majewski during the Civil War. In 1864, they wanted to recruit and secure approximately 20.000–30.000 Polish soldiers for Confederacy in exchange for grants of lands for the Polish colony (Derengowski, 2015, p. 394). That idea had never materialized. However, notes in Flake's Bulletin (1867) suggest that after the war Bishop Dubuis was in contact with "General Solensky" (possibly colonel Józef Smoliński) who emphasized that Bishop's formidable influence could assist in recruiting more Polish people, which Bishop Dubuis meant to explore during his next visit to Europe. Flake's Bulletin (Galveston, Texas), "Polish Immigration" February 13, 1867, p. 2 (PGST, vol. X, no. 1, p. 21); Flake's Bulletin (Galveston, Texas) "Polish Emigration", May 5, 1867, p. 4 (PGST, vol. XXXII, no. 1, pp. 13–14).

7 Per the ordination book located at the Galveston-Houston Diocesan Archives, Fr. Felix Orzechowski underwent a speedy progression in his clerical ordination. He attained the status of Sub Deacon on November 1, 1866 at St. Mary's Cathedral in Galveston; a Deacon on November 3, 1866; and of priesthood on November 4, 1866. He was 28 at the time (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 32).

8 Polish names extracted from the census records, land transactions, tax rolls, or manifest listings require careful study. Due to the language barrier between the census takers and respondents and poor education background of many early settlers' names were spelled phonetically and vary from document to document. Case in point here is the Rybkowski family whose name

Mass is believed to have been celebrated on the plantation of Captain H.M. Fisher. Inspired by Father Orzechowski's spiritual leadership, Captain Fisher generously offered him a house and some land for cultivation in exchange for his commitment to remain on the plantation, ensuring the cohesion of the Polish immigrant community. Fisher also offered to teach the Polish immigrants English and American farming methods, but Father Felix declined, emphasizing his duty to those beyond the Fisher plantation. This highlights his unwavering dedication to the spiritual well-being of the Polish immigrants under his care.

Father Felix's religious services were conducted in various settings, including outdoor venues and homes, with some gatherings also held on the Powell plantation in Waverly. Despite nearly a decade of devoted labor, no formal church structure was erected during his tenure. However, he established numerous parishes that served as foundational pillars for a vibrant Polish Catholic community in Texas (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 53).

New Waverly – the Mother Colony of Brazos Valley Poles

The first Polish stronghold in Southeast Texas was nearby New Waverly. This farming and lumber area of rolling pine and post-oak woodlands needed laborers in the sawmills and cotton fields. In 1870, San Jacinto County was carved out of a portion of Walker County, including the Waverly area. During this time, Waverly leaders, apprehensive that the Houston and Great Northern Railroad Company would bring in vagrants and illiteracy to the town and harm cattle, declined to grant the railroad a right-of-way to pass through. In 1870 the company laid its tracks ten miles west of Waverly and set aside a townsite known as Waverly Station. This action led to the rapid downfall of Waverly (Holder).

appears in various documents as Wrybkowski, Wyripkowski, Wrypkosk (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 70), Krowski (*Ibid*., p. 8), Ripkowski (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 2, p. 24). In some instances, the first names and surnames are reversed. Stanislaus Watta is listed in 1870 Walker County Census as Walter Stencil. Some other misspelled examples to illustrate the extent of misuse are: Silevisti Jno (Cerklowski John), Lukasevat also Lookashey also Leetatwitz (Łukaszewicz), Dumby (Dombrowski) Jagoit also Gregory also Gogegerki (Grzegorek), Parralock also Pavalock (Pawlak), Basket also Pascatt (Paszkiet), Sakowosk also Sackwick (Suchowiak), Buckner (Bochnia), Kochanoweiz (Kochanowicz) (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, pp. 21–25). The manifest list of Meyer Levy Poles from the steerage area of SS "City of Antwerp" also contains Polish names misspelled beyond recognition: Sciba (Szczibinski), Kazwersong (Kazimierowski), Dawkrawitz (Dutkiewicz), Musguiske (Muszynski), Van Woffm Lowski (Wojciechowski) (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, pp. 6–9).

The town where Waverly Emigration Society was formed, had become the vestige of early Texas history when cotton was king, and the planters' elite still maintained dominance in opposition to the growing sentiments of anti-slavery. Waverly Station swiftly converted to a magnet for many residents of Waverly who wanted to capitalize on the railroad, and the new town's name was soon renamed New Waverly. A post office opened in 1873. By 1884, New Waverly had grown dynamically in population and essential amenities such as general stores, sawmills, cotton gins, saloons, and a gristmill were established. By 1896, it had evolved into a thriving center with a diversified economic landscape witnessing the addition of boardinghouses, restaurants, doctors, and a lumber company which solidified its status as a robust and self-sustaining community (PGST, vol. XXXVII, no. 1, pp. 1–10).

New Waverly (1869) served as the foundational nucleus for subsequent Polish colonies in Southeast Texas. In the early years, the town also played a central role as a hub for Polish missionaries who assisted in neighboring towns (Baker, 1982, p. 65). Early Polish Catholic Churches in the Brazos Valley were built in Brenham (1870), Marlin (1872), Bryan (1873),[9] Anderson (1876), Bremond (1876), Chappell Hill (1889), Plantersville (1894), Bellville (1900), Stoneham (1909), Rosenberg (1910), and Richmond (1935).[10] Some parishes were primarily Polish, such as those in Bremond and Chappell Hill. Others, like St. Mary's in Brenham, initially shared congregations with Catholics of Irish, German, Czech, and Hispanic backgrounds, and later expanded to include immigrants from Vietnam and the Philippines in the twentieth century (PGST, vol. XIII, no. 2, p. 5). In 1873, Father Orzechowski ministered to Polish families in Plantersville, which later saw an influx of German families (PGST, vol. X, no. 3, p. 3). Poles subsequently moved to nearby Stoneham and organized a mission there. Due to historical tensions rooted in Old World rivalries and the arrival of a new pastor at St. Mary's, the Polish community in the Stoneham area chose to separate from the Plantersville community. They

9 There are some discrepancies in the initiation dates of Brazos Valley churches provided in various sources. The Polish Genealogical Society of Texas (PGST) lists the founding date of the Bryan church as 1876, following Dworaczyk (1936). However, parish beginnings can be traced back to 1873. On March 19, 2023, the feast of St. Joseph, St. Joseph Catholic Church in Bryan, Texas, celebrated its 150th anniversary under the motto: "Many cultures, one faith." The Polish American Council of Texas highlighted the Polish contribution to the parish's organization by holding its annual meeting in Bryan on November 11, 2023, attended by many local Polish-Texans. The event began with a celebratory mass, after which Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz, the current president of PACT and a St. Joseph's church parishioner, spoke about the early history of Bryan Poles and their cultural influence in the Brazos Valley.

10 Compare: Nesterowicz, 1909; Dworaczyk, 1936; Przygoda, 1971; Baker, 1982.

aligned themselves with the Polish community of Anderson, functioning as a mission, and erected their own sanctuary under the spiritual guidance and jurisdiction of the Polish-speaking pastor of St. Stanislaus in Anderson. This arrangement persisted until 1967, when jurisdiction transitioned back to St. Mary's in Plantersville, with St. Joseph's returning to the original arrangement as its mission (PGST, vol. XXVI, no. 2, p. 3).

Genealogical records and burial sites indicate the presence of Polish communities in Hempstead, Waller, Wallis, Sealy, Millican, Navasota, Wooten Wells, and Industry. In these locations, the Polish community followed similar economic paths to those in New Waverly, beginning with farming on rented land and eventually purchasing their own properties with the money they saved. New Waverly, situated in the Trinity River Basin to the east of the Brazos River, became a gateway to other Polish settlements predominantly located in the bottomlands of the Brazos River Valley. Consequently, the Polish element in the region and their descendants are often referred to as Polish-Texans of Brazos Valley or Brazos Valley Poles.[11]

Father Orzechowski served as a missionary and parish priest in several parishes across Southeast Texas, although his tenure in each location was relatively brief, necessitating frequent relocations. In 1876, he moved to Anderson to organize the St. Stanislaus parish for Polish settlers, some of whom had originally been in Waverly. Sacramental records indicate that he ministered to Polish immigrants in Plantersville, Grimes County, and Marlin, Falls County (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 37).

Despite his constant movement, Father Orzechowski's efforts and hard work were recognized and valued by the early settlers. His frequent relocations, however, lent him an enigmatic and legendary status in the Southeast Texas community. He became known as the "peregrinating priest" or the "wandering apostle," with his name enduring throughout the history of many Polish parishes "like a golden thread" (Kruszka, 1998, pp. 348–351; PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 34).

When he departed Texas, various accounts emerged to explain his absence. Given his revolutionary past, many speculated that he had returned to Poland, only to be captured and killed by Russian oppressors. An article published in the Navasota Daily Examiner on May 26, 1936, described his departure from the United States due to struggles with the oppressive summer climate and his subsequent fate in Warsaw, where he was deemed a dangerous radical, tried, convicted, and sentenced to Siberia

11 Silesian Texans with their mother colony Panna Maria (1854) concentrated in settlements closer to San Antonio, Texas.

(PGST, vol. X, no. 3, p. 10; cf. Dworaczyk, 1936, p. 177). This narrative reinforced the perception of Father Orzechowski as a martyr for his beliefs.

The myths surrounding his fate persisted within the Polish diaspora into the 1970s, when the Texas Historical Commission erected a historic marker at St. Joseph's Church in New Waverly, perpetuating the same storyline:

> The Rev. Felix Orzechowski came to Texas in 1866 in response to an appeal for Polish missionaries and organized St. Joseph's Parish in 1869. As the first Catholic church in Walker County, it served the many Polish families who settled in the area during the 1870s. Church tradition often sustained the immigrants until they adjusted to life in their new country. During Father Orzechowski's pastorate, services were held outdoors or in private homes. Soon after leaving this parish in 1876, he returned to Poland, where he was imprisoned by Russian officials for advocating democratic ideals. In 1877, under the direction of the Rev. Victor Justiana Linicki, a Polish baron turned priest, a frame church building was erected. In 1897, a larger edifice designed by Tom Lavandoski was constructed, and the original structure was repurposed as a school. The present church building, begun in 1905 and dedicated on the feast of St. Joseph on March 19, 1908, during the pastorate of the Rev. Thomas Aloysius Bily (1859–1921), is a stately Gothic-style structure designed by L.S. Green, reflecting the European heritage of the parishioners. The parish school operated until 1951. St. Joseph's Catholic Church continues to minister to the descendants of New Waverly's historic Polish community (Recorded Texas Historic Landmark – 1975, Texas Historical Commission).[12]

Later research conducted by the Polish Genealogical Society of Texas (PGST) revealed that Father Orzechowski continued his missionary work in parishes outside of Texas, including locations in Wisconsin, Ohio, New York, Iowa, Michigan, and New Jersey (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 38; Kruszka, 1994; Houck, 1903). As his health declined, he returned to Poland and, after a short illness, passed away in Cracow. According to his obituary, he died on August 17 and was laid to rest on August 20, 1904, at a cemetery in Cracow.

Early Polish missionary priests, including Rev. Orzechowski in Southeast Texas, quickly recognized that preserving the religious and cultural heritage of their people required strengthening and expanding the community. They understood that a robust, growing population was essential

12 This historic marker is in front of St. Joseph Catholic Church in New Waverly to this day (December 2023).

to maintaining their traditions and values in a new land.[13] When individuals marry within the community, they strengthen social bonds and create a shared cultural narrative. This cohesion was crucial for the sustainability and growth of the Polish colony, fostering a common faith, values, and traditions. Interethnic marriages were perceived as a potential threat to the preservation of ethnic identity, as they had the potential to dilute the culture and weaken the social networks that maintained the community.

Father Orzechowski's commitment to community building was evident in his efforts to organize congregations and encourage unity. Through his correspondence, he actively promoted Texas to prospective settlers in Prussia and West Galicia. An account by Jan Kaszycki, a former village mayor of Bączal near Jasło in the Austro-Hungarian partition, and undersigned by two other immigrants, Michał Cholewiak and Jędrzej Strugała, dated December 10, 1873, in the town of Calvert, Texas, attests to Father Orzechowski's efforts. The letter reveals that Father Felix was promising a new Eden for Galician peasants, highlighting his role in encouraging immigration and fostering the growth of the Polish community in Texas.[14] His plea was initially answered by Kasper Szybist from Brzostek, Wojciech (Adalbert) Dzięglewicz from Bączal Górny (PGST, vol. XV, no. 2, p. 19), and several other families who sold their possessions and emigrated to Texas on May 8, 1872 (Czas, p. 11). Their vessel, the Celestial Empire, arrived in New York from Bremen, Germany, on June 15, 1872 (PGST, vol. XV, no. 2, p. 18), and they were listed as Germans arriving in America (Glazier and Filby, 1998). According to Agnes Knapik Knast, who arrived in August 1873 from the Polish lands of the Austrian partition, communications by the parish priest of the New Waverly church in Texas were publicly disseminated from the pulpit at Jasło (PGST, vol. XVII, no. 2, p. 47). These messages expounded on the prospects available in Texas, extolling the virtues of the fertile land and other opportunities.

Father Orzechowski extended a warm invitation, urging individuals to consider relocating to Texas.[15] Agnes's father, Stanislaus, responded to this call by selling his land and embarking on a journey with his wife and

13 Father Lisicki who continued Orzechowski's legacy wanted to create a "Polish Voivodeship" in Texas (*Gazeta Polska w Chicago*. January 25, 1877).

14 *Czas*, Chłop Polski w Ameryce, no. 11, January 15, 1874.

15 Their names were Bartula, Bes, Bielamowicz, Bochnia, Bulgiewicz, Bylinowski, Dzięglewicz, Knapik, Kuciemba, Maduzia, Olbrych, Palka, Szybist, Szydek, and Zabawa (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 39). Many more followed in the 1880s, primarily family members joining their relatives. While some settled permanently in Walker and Montgomery Counties, others swiftly moved to Falls, Robertson, Grimes, and Brazos Counties. Within a decade, despite their initial poverty, many acquired their own land and constructed their own residences, embodying a testament to their resilience and progress (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 3, p. 38).

six children to Galveston, where they were personally received by Father Orzechowski. After a brief residence in New Waverly, they subsequently relocated to Marlin and eventually to Bremond. This trajectory mirrored the migratory pattern of many Polish immigrants from West Galicia under the Austrian partition (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 1, p. 2).

Bremond – the Polish Capital of Texas

The rise of Bremond as the capital of Texas Polonia in the late nineteenth century, as emphasized by Nesterowicz (1909, p. 130), was significantly influenced by the arrival of Joseph Bartula in Robertson County. The graves of Joseph and Catherine Bartula, located at St. Mary Cemetery in Bremond, TX, are marked by a Texas State historic marker placed between them. Erected in 1976, the marker reads:

> JOSEPH AND CATHERINE BARTULA
>
> Born in Poland, Joseph (1840–1919) and Catherine (1841–1907) Bartula overcame many hardships after migration to Texas in 1873. They became the first Polish settlers in Robertson County in 1875. Assisted by J.C. and Mary Roberts, on whose farm he worked, Bartula wrote letters urging other Polish immigrants to join him. Soon fifty families arrived from Poland and 60 moved here from the Marlin area. By 1885, the Town of Bremond had the largest Polish settlement in Texas, 345 families, Bartula later bought his own farm and became a leader in community and church affairs. The Bartulas had ten children.

Joseph Bartula, born in Nowy Żmigród, was a tradesperson – a cartwright from the village of Brzostek, located in Pilzno County in Austro-Hungarian Poland. According to his diary,[16] he and his wife and five children emigrated to Texas on May 16, 1873. They arrived in Galveston and journeyed through New Waverly, where the family of his brother-in-law Kacper Szybist lived, eventually reaching the area of Calvert. On January 6, 1875, they arrived in Bremond to work for John C. Roberts as tenant farmers for two years. J.C. Roberts, a large landholder in Robertson County,

16 The original diary of Józef Bartula, translated from Polish into English by Katherine and Teana Sechelski for the Polish Genealogical Society of Texas (PGST), is titled *History of the Founding of the Polish Colony in Bremond, Texas, written by Joseph Bartula in the year 1894* (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 1, pp. 4–7; vol. XVI, no. 3, pp. 6–8). This personal account details the history of the Bremond Poles from the inception of the colony until 1888, when Bartula's notebook was handed over to Fr. Litwora, who did not continue the entries.

and his wife, Mary, provided crucial support to the Polish immigrants, aiding them with legal matters, land purchases, financial assistance, and even hosting religious services in their home. Later, they helped Polish settlers build their own Catholic church (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 3, p. 21). Without this support, the success of the Polish settlement at Bremond might not have been possible (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 1, pp. 2–4).

Bartula's family experienced tremendous psychological trauma during their journey. Through his recollections we learn that he lost all his saving and three of his five children died along the way. Still, he was satisfied with the conditions that he found in Robertson County and took on a leadership role by writing letters to other Poles, encouraging them to move to the area (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 3, p. 17). For Bartula, just like any other Polish peasant, social and political influence was intricately tied to land ownership. That sentiment prompted Polish immigrants to prioritize land acquisition as a paramount objective. Evidenced by entries in Robertson County deeds, Jozef and Catherine purchased their inaugural 40-acre tract for $310 on April 27, 1877. Later, they expanded their holdings in 1883, acquiring an additional 100 acres for $350 and, in 1890, various contiguous parcels for $700 (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 3, p. 10).

> Around the same time, Frank Bajanski (also known as Bainski or Bienski) arrived from Prussia-Poland, followed by Jacob Suchowiak, Michael Paszkiet, Anton Kazmierowski, and John Cerklewski. The early settlement thus became a reflection of this blend of Austrian and Prussian Poles (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 1, p. 2). Each migration chain was connected to different regions in the "Old Country," which had long been influenced by distinct economic, political, social, educational, and, to some extent, religious systems. While Austrian and Prussian Poles shared a devotion to the Catholic faith, their customs often differed, and their dialects revealed linguistic diversity. This mixture enriched the cultural character of the settlement, adding to its unique tapestry.[17] By 1879, when St. Mary's Catholic Church was constructed, Bremond was home to fifty Polish families who supported the church's establishment through their contributions (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 1, p. 5). Some of these families had relocated from Marlin, situated northwest of Bremond, while others came from Bryan in Brazos County, possibly due to the unfortunate burning of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in November 1876. During the period of the church's destruction

17 Geographical origin fostered a sense of solidarity among those arriving from the same region in Poland. Early on, Bartula expressed misgivings towards his compatriots from the Greater Poland region, claiming that they identified more as Prussian rather than Polish (Groniowski, 1992, p. 158). This rivalry may have arisen from the fact that many Poles emigrating from the Prussian partition could communicate in German with the German ethnic communities that had settled nearby in the Brazos Valley.

> and a temporary absence of a priest in Bryan, Reverend Joseph Mosiewicz arrived to assume pastoral responsibilities at St. Mary's Catholic Parish in Bremond on December 25, 1877 (PGST, vol. IX, no. 4, p. 4).

In July 1881, Bartula returned to Poland to recruit more countrymen (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 1, p. 2). This effort led to a significant influx of Austrian Poles in the following years (PGST, vol. VIII, no. 3, p. 6), many of whom came from the Lesko area, the birthplace of Bartula's second wife (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 3, p. 6). Among the twelve major Polish Catholic settlements in Southeast Texas, Bremond had the largest population of Austrian Poles (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 3, p. 3). In contrast, Chappell Hill and neighboring Brenham, located in Washington County, were primarily populated by families from the Poznań and Bydgoszcz areas. Beginning in 1884, this period of immigration witnessed a slight decline due to a sequence of arid and agriculturally unproductive years, reaching its culmination in the severe drought of 1887. The adverse climate conditions were also widely publicized in older states, creating a perception of Texas as an inhospitable region for farmers.[18] To the outside world, the people of Texas were starving[19] (PGST, vol. IX, no. 4, p. 5). Economic downturns, agricultural setbacks, and various adversities eroded confidence among Texans, prompting migrations both within the state and to other states in search of better opportunities. Some Polish families moved to California, Illinois, Michigan, and Missouri (PGST, vol. XVI, no. 3, p. 20), while others relocated south to Houston. Despite these shifting demographics, Bartula's enduring presence in Bremond earned him respect in his later years and solidified his reputation as a key figure in the establishment, development, and resilience of the Polish community in Robertson County.[20]

After World War II, the rise of technology and urbanization presented new opportunities for young people, leading many to move away from rural, agrarian lifestyles. As a result, the church, once the central hub of

18 Gazeta Polska w Chicago. (July 5, 1888) year 16, no. 27, p. 4.

19 For these reasons, the State of Texas published its First Annual Report of the Agricultural Bureau of the Department of Agriculture, Insurance, Statistics, and History. This initiative aimed not only to effectively publicize Texas but also to attract a fair share of immigrants from more established states and foreign nations. Beyond its intrinsic significance for Texas residents, this report was regarded as the most effective immigration dossier for international dissemination (PGST, vol. IX, no. 4, p. 5).

20 In the June 28, 1888 edition of *Gazeta Polska w Chicago* newspaper (year 16, no. 26, p. 1), Karwowski defended Bartula, highlighting his hospitality towards newcomers in Bremond and emphasizing his vital role in forming and strengthening the community. Bartula was instrumental in the construction of St. Mary's Polish Catholic Church and a parochial school, which were key to the community's cohesion and development.

social life and community bonding, began to lose its prominence. In rural Texas, where the cotton industry had once flourished, churches remained as vestiges of a bygone era, enduring despite significant depopulation throughout the 20th century. Polish customs continued to be observed until the late 1950s, gradually fading as the original immigrants and their first-generation American descendants passed away (PGST, vol. XI, no. 4, p. 5). The processes of assimilation and acculturation to the dominant American culture had a profound impact on younger generations.

However, recent shifts towards cultural pluralism and multiculturalism have fostered a renewed recognition, appreciation, and preservation of diverse cultural, religious, and linguistic heritages within the societal framework. This change has sparked a revival of ethnic identities, allowing Polish-Texans to reconnect with and celebrate their unique cultural expressions. Many retirees from the Brazos Valley have returned to their family farms or childhood villages, while younger Polish-Texans come back for weddings, baptisms, reunions (PGST, vol. XIII, no. 2, p. 26), and parish festivals or celebrations.

On December 1, 2019, St. Joseph Parish in New Waverly celebrated its 150th anniversary with a Mass led by His Eminence Cardinal DiNardo. The event attracted many parishioners and descendants of the Second Wave Poles, who continue to uphold their cultural ties (PGST, vol. XXXVII, no. 1).

In conclusion, this study delves into the history, cultural traditions, religious customs, and social networks that sustained the Polish community in Southeast Texas. It sheds light on the lived experiences of Polish immigrants during the second wave, revealing their geographical origins and settlement patterns post-Civil War. By doing so, it enriches the broader understanding of Polish Americans within a rural context and adds to discussions on immigration, ethnicity, identity, and cultural heritage in a multiethnic American society. Furthermore, it underscores the contributions of Polish immigration to the cultural and economic development of Texas.

Examining the agrarian lifestyle and the central role of the parish, this study emphasizes the interconnectedness of the "quartet pillars" of the Polish Brazos Valley community: faith, family, friends, and farms. These elements were pivotal in shaping and sustaining the community's development and cohesion. The legacy of key figures such as Meyer Levy, Father Felix Orzechowski, and Joseph Bartula endures among the descendants of the second wave of Polish emigrants, who continue to maintain connections to their Polish heritage while forging lives in the United States.

Lastly, this study highlights a historical Polish community in the Brazos Valley, Texas, distinguishing it from the more widely recognized Panna

Maria Polish Silesians. Through exploring this unique community, the study provides valuable insights into the diverse narratives of Polish immigration in America.

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