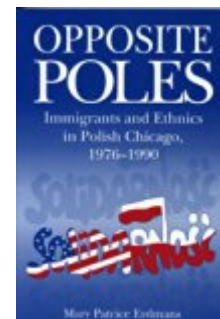


Mary Patrice Erdmans. *Opposite Poles: Immigrants and Ethnics in Polish Chicago, 1976-1990.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. x+267 pp. \$69.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-271-01735-8.



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Words mean a great deal to historians. They are the lifeblood of a profession that so thoroughly relies upon a written record to operate. Two simple words such as "manifest destiny" can convey volumes in terms of both narration and interpretation. Thus, when a scholar mentions the "New Immigration," historians typically harken back to the post-1890 rush of Eastern and Southern Europeans through Ellis Island and other ports of entry.

However, for sociologists -- historical sociologists included -- the phrase "New Immigration" speaks to the rush of Asians, Latin Americans, and some Europeans during the post-1965 years. It is this last group that preoccupies Professor Mary Patrice Erdmans. She is preoccupied with the relationships between Polish-Americans who have been in the United States for generations (the historian's New Immigration) and those who arrived in the last three decades (the social scientist's New Immigration). As events unfolded in Poland after 1976 (first in 1981 with a declaration of martial law and eight years later with the affirming election in a soon-to-be democratic Poland), the long-

established Polish-American community -- especially in Chicago with its 900,000 residents of Polish ancestry -- struggled to absorb émigrés from communist Poland while at the same time grappling with the demands for new strategies to address the evolving realities in Eastern Europe. These "Ethnics" versus "Immigrants" constitute the opposite Poles depicted in the book's play-on-words title.

Erdmans's study is largely an organizational and intellectual history, although through the use of oral interviews Erdmans captures some of the individual intricacies of the contest over "correct" strategies to be employed in the face of changing landscapes in the Polish motherland. The bitterness of newcomers who felt that established Polish-American organizations, most notably the Polish American Congress (PAC), were anachronisms dedicated to polkas and Casimir Pulaski Days was balanced by the frustrations of the Ethnics who could not understand the hyper-emotionalism and lack of respect for incumbent Polish organizations and its leadership found among the Immigrants. The establishment of competing organiza-

tions among the newcomers particularly distressed traditionalists.

Erdmans makes an important point, repeated throughout her study, that Polishness is not a single notion, understood by all the parties who might seemingly rally around a common identity. The weakness in leadership and lack of direction that Immigrants perceived in Polish-Americans made the newcomers question just how dedicated the Ethnicns were to their Polish roots and to the survival of the Solidarity Movement. The modern, post-World War II Poland under communism was significantly different from the partitioned Poland of pre-World War One that the parents and grandparents of many Ethnicns identified as their homeland. In between was a third cohort that came to the United States during the Second World War or immediately thereafter; they had lived in an independent but autocratic Poland under Josef Pilsudski. Erdmans wishes to put aside once and for all the notion that ethnic identity inherently requires unity of thought and a monolithic self-image. Instead, she pushes the notion of diversity and complexity determined by the timing of one's migration and by the conditions extant in the homeland at the time of the transplantation. It is the "internal" borders of "being" Polish that intrigue Erdmans.

To complete this task, the author employs four basic methodologies: interviews, participant observation, surveys, and archival research. The first two provide a personal tone to the text as she conducted nearly four dozen interviews with members of all three immigration waves. Extensive use of quotations, especially by Ethnicns and Immigrants, places the battles between these two visions of what Poland needed in the 1980s in personal context. Insults fly back and forth so that there is no question that unity is not a central characteristic of Polishness during the years under study. In a nice touch of in-the-field contact, Erdmans taught English to Polish immigrants during her research phase. Erdmans's attendance at

organizational meetings, political rallies, and weddings provides a first-hand picture of the disputes between the two central cohorts. To provide detailed specifics on the Immigrants, Erdmans conducted four surveys that reveal characteristics such as age, job skills, language abilities, and educational backgrounds. Her archival sources include Polish language newspapers, organizational records, and private letters.

Opposite Poles, while modest in length, is not an easy read. The writing is professional but lacks verve and is often saddled with reiterations that are unnecessary. The stylistic skeleton of a dissertation reveals itself throughout the book. In addition, although the heart of American Polonia is clearly Chicago, the dynamics of the city and its Polish-American population are not as central to the storyline as one might expect from the title. Since so many of the contentions between Ethnic and Immigrant organizations occurs at the national level, many of the more energetic exchanges take place at national conventions or in national publications. With the exception of Roman Pucinski, a name familiar to Chicagoans, most of the other players, regardless of which cohort they may represent, are not individuals who embody local flavor.

Opposite Poles is a valuable, if somewhat weighty, work for those who may wish to see what happens to ethnic identity after acculturation which, in turn, is followed by a newer migration whose principal allegiance is not with the new world but the old. The lack of passionate intensity by old-time Polish-Americans, the Ethnicns in Erdmans's language, for the direction of Poland's unfolding crises in the 1980s makes perfect sense to historians familiar with the post-World War II drift of ethnic pluralism. Absorption into the mainstream of American life has been Mission #1 throughout the twentieth century for groups such as PAC. Bobby Vinton has come to mean Polishness more than secretly smuggling telecommunications contraband into a commu-

nist-dominated Poland. The graying of American Polonia, tired from both chronological age as well as chronological distance from the new realities of the motherland, depicts the state of ethnic politics and ethnic culture in the last years of the twentieth century. Common geographical origins provide the opportunity for unity but, as the author underscores, it is not a guarantee.

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