2015 Polish Heritage Society of Rochester
Literary Competition Submission Form

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We're kept apart, my brother,
By a fate that we can't deny.
From our two opposing dugouts
We're staring death in the eye.

In the trenches filled with groaning,
Alert to the shellfire's whine,
We stand and confront each other.
I'm your enemy: and you are mine

So when you catch me in your sights
I beg you, play your part,
And sink your Muscovite bullet
Deep in my Polish heart.

Now I see the vision clearly,
Caring not that we'll both be dead;
For *that which has not perished*
Shall rise from the blood we shed.
(Edward Słoński)

As Polish poet and soldier Edward Słoński memorialized in his poem, "Ta co nie zginęła" (That which has not perished), Polish history had taken a very dark turn up to the start of the twentieth century. While it deals with the events of the First World War, this poem also points to a larger conflict among the Polish in this time period. The partitioned pieces of the shattered Polish homeland had also divided friends and family. In addition, the traditional way of life was under assault from multiple angles. Both Russians and Germans enacted measures to squash Polish culture in their respective slices of the fatherland. All of these issues, compounded with economic and social strife, led many men and women of Polish heritage to make the voyage across the Atlantic and try their luck in the burgeoning United States. However, it is a misconception to say that these people abandoned Polish culture by relocating to America. In fact, they succeeded in maintaining it.

Perhaps one of the most poignant reasons for emigration to America was that it was simply becoming too difficult to be Polish in Poland. In order to exert control over their seized Polish lands, the tsarist Russian government decided in the late 1800's that it was best to squash vestiges of Polish culture and therefore lessen the likelihood of more uprisings. The Russians

desired homogeneity among their provinces, and spirited Polish attempts at freedom demonstrated the Tsar's lack of influence in the area. Professor Oscar Halecki, a revered Polish history scholar, elaborates on this effort in *A History of Poland*,

> …it was no longer a case of chastising only the insurgents and all those who were suspected of connivance with the culprits, but of exterminating the Polish population there and effacing all the traces of its centuries-old influence… The Governor-General Muraviev, who carried this programme into execution, was given by the Russians themselves the name of 'Hangman.' The Government went so far as to forbid the use of Polish in any and every public place, finally even in the churches, as well as teaching, even in private, the language. (255)

Without a doubt, these measures proved devastating to those who held Polish values dear to their hearts. Their pride was wounded when Poland was gobbled up by its more powerful neighbors and further insulted when a succession of insurrections to regain their territory were decisively put down. However, it was almost snuffed into oblivion when the Tsar began this campaign to conquer the minds of his acquired Polish subjects.

Events on the German front were no more promising. Like Russia, Germany saw Poles as a threat to a unified state. Even though the country itself was dissolved, the culture and unity of Poland remained, much to the chagrin of its conquerors. One of the most important facets to Polish society is the Catholic Church. The Germans realized this and figured that they could diminish Polish influence by removing the Church as a hub for the culture. This movement, which began in 1872, was subsequently coined "Kulturkampf." Historian Piotr S. Wandycz explains the importance of this undertaking in *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795-1918*, "…*Kulturkampf* [was] launched in Germany in order to integrate and centralize the Reich against centrifugal, particularist tendencies of regionalism and Catholicism" (228). Clearly, the time was becoming ripe for an emigration from occupied Poland.

In addition to widespread persecution of the Polish in their own homeland, many Poles hoped to improve economic standing by moving to the United States. My own great great grandparents are two such examples. I learned about them through an interview with my grandmother, Barbara Burkard. Her grandfather, John Sadowski, was born in Poland in 1885 and became a farmer. However, due to the political and economic turmoil in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he decided that it would be advantageous for him to emigrate to a Polish community in Grand Rapids, Michigan. When there, he took up construction and cabinetry to make a living (Interview). John was one of the many lower-class Poles who were able to make the trip across the Atlantic in an attempt to better their lives. They congregated in Polish neighborhoods, primarily in Chicago and New York City. Not only did this allow them to send money back to relatives in Poland, but it also helped preserve their society. In fact, John maintained a profound fondness for his Polish heritage. He began collecting pictures of Polish churches and countryside from magazines after he moved. While he had left Poland to improve his life, his heart always remained in his home country.

While Polish culture was being repressed in the fatherland, emigrants found that they could express themselves freely in the United States. Social, political and economic hardships drove Polish peasants abroad, but the opportunities in the United States allowed them to flourish. Since the Polish immigrants were allowed to express themselves freely, they experienced a culture boom. According to Aleksander Gieysztor in *History of Poland*,

> …by the end of the century the general level of political consciousness of the Polish peasant was probably higher among the emigrants in America than at home…[emigration] enriched the Polish village and it produced an important political factor for the national cause, the influence of the Polish community in the U.S.A. (499-500)

Clearly, emigration to America not only helped to relieve the Polish of their recent trials in Europe, but it also helped them regain a sense of national identity that was being repressed there. They made a name for themselves in the United States and sent some money overseas to family members that couldn't do the same. Without a doubt, Polish emigration had benefits for all parties involved

In Słoński's poem, the narrator is fighting for "that which has not perished," or a sense of a unique Polish national identity that has been under attack for many years. He hopes that through his efforts, it will rise again through the blood shed in the war. However, this sense of distinctiveness continued to thrive in Polish communities in America. These emigrants never abandoned their culture. Instead, they played an active role in preserving it. Both the Russians and Germans were making active attempts to squash Polish individuality, but they definitely did not succeed.

Works Cited

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