

## **POLISH AMERICANS IN TOLEDO, OHIO, USA: ETHNICITY AND HOLIDAY TRADITIONS**

David J. Jackson

*Bowling Green State University,  
Department of Political Science, BGSU,  
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403-0001, USA  
jacksod@bgsu.edu*

### **Abstract**

This paper presents a case study of Polish American Christmas events in Toledo, Ohio in 2013 through interviews and participant-observation ethnographic research.<sup>1</sup> It also briefly examines the history of the Polish American presence in Toledo, as well as the challenges the community faces now that its members no longer live in geographically concentrated neighborhoods. Despite the changing tastes of Toledoans both of Polish origin and other backgrounds, as well as controversies surrounding some Polish American events, a noticeable Polish American presence remains in the city and region, and is especially active around Christmas time.

**Key words:** *ethnicity, identity, Polish-American, holidays, Christmas*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Near the end of the second decade of the 21st century, what, if anything, does ethnicity mean for white Americans? Does categorization by ethnicity actually demonstrate any forms of difference among the assimilated descendants of European immigrants from the great wave of immigration between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century? Given intermarriage among white ethnics, how does one decide if one is Polish, German, or Irish American? The continuing presence of St. Patrick's Day celebrations, Oktoberfests, Polish festivals and Dyngus Days may signify real interest in ethnic expression, or they may be ways for bars, towns and ethnic organizations to make a quick dollar by exploiting people's need to feel connected to something larger than themselves.

Polish Americans of the third, fourth and fifth generations are many decades removed from their immigrant ancestors, and their ties to Polish traditions and heritage may be on the wane. This leads many scholars to argue that being descended from white

---

<sup>1</sup> Interviews were conducted mostly through email to afford participants the opportunity to express fully complicated thoughts about their ethnic identity and community.

European immigrants no longer plays a significant role in the day-to-day formation of personal and communal identity. Herbert Gans saw the renewed interest in ethnicity among fourth generation white ethnics in the 1960s and 1970s as not a true ethnic revival, but instead as a change from the lived ethnicity of the previous generations to what he termed “symbolic ethnicity.” Symbolic ethnicity is, “a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior” [Gans 1979: 9] Alba studied mostly European ethnic-Americans in Albany, New York, and found support for Gans’ theory, as well evidence of the growth of a pan-European ethnic identity [Alba 1990]. Waters went much further and controversially claimed that the symbolic ethnicity of white Americans is “optional” and “contentless” [Waters 1991]. In Waters’ analysis, for today’s descendants of 19th and early 20th century European immigrants, ethnicity is something that can be switched on and off at will. In this sense, ethnicity becomes an individual choice, as opposed to being more nearly a fixed and immutable group characteristic.

On the other hand, many scholars note the persistence of ethnic identity among white Americans, or are less harshly critical of symbolic ethnicity. Erdmans (2000) claims, “Closed immigration doors, sealed borders, and a hostile assimilationist policy characterized the situation for Polish Americans for much of (the 20th) century” [Erdmans 2000: 23]. The opposite of each of these in the 1990s led her to predict the persistence of ethnic identity among Polish Americans. Her work also points out the complexity of the Polish American community when she writes, “The meaning of Polishness differs depending on whether one is foreign-born or native-born Polonian, it depends on whether one has been here five or fifty years, and it depends on what Poland looked like when they or their ancestors left” [Erdmans 2000: 23].

Bayor argues that ethnicity among whites, “continues to have some meaning and represents the basis for some differences in values and behavior among various ethnic groups” [Bayor 2009: 20]. Data shows that, “(d)ifferences exist between ethnic groups on matters that include child rearing, mental illness, attitudes toward disease, disease rates, and family values” [Bayor 2009: 21]. Interestingly, individuals need not adopt an ethnic identity or live in an ethnic culture for these differences to persist.

In a study of the old Italian neighborhood in Boston, Smajda and Gerteis point out that many Americans seek out ethnic experiences, and, “(t)his search for ethnic roots and identifications may take on real subjective importance in a multicultural world, even if whites’ identification remains largely symbolic” [Smajda & Gerteis 2012: 620]. By this understanding, ethnic identity can be very important at the individual level, even if it does not occur on a daily basis in an ethnic neighborhood.

In his introductory and summary chapters to the collected works of Helena Stankiewicz Zand concerning Polish American folkways, Obidinski discusses the limitations of quantitative measures of ethnic persistence among Polish Americans, and argues in favor of instead examining folkways as ethnic expression. He examines which folkways that Zand identified persist and which have faded (as of 1987) and made the interesting claim that, “Among future generations of Polish Americans, the expression of Polonian ethnicity may emphasize public celebrations rather than the forms of private family ritual” [Obidinski & Stankiewicz Zand 1987: 131]. This transformation of ethnicity from private, family based activities to public behaviors and rituals seems unlikely given the millions of Polish American families and their adaptations of Polish folkways, but his prediction certainly accurately foreshadowed

the growth of Polish American festivals, public Wigilia celebrations, Dyngus Days, and so on.

Finally, scholars have recently demonstrated that, for some Polish Americans of the fourth or fifth generation, there remain negative consequences of others identifying them with their ethnic heritage. A recent survey of young Polish Americans enrolled at universities and a community college in Ohio showed that 17.1% have felt unfairly treated because of their Polish ethnic origin [Jackson & Liggett 2018]. Clearly for some Polish Americans, their ethnicity is not exclusively symbolic and contentless, but can still come with negative consequences.

This article examines through interviews and participant observation how a number of Polish American groups in Toledo, Ohio maintain and promote Polish American culture and identity. Specifically, it looks at how a small number of groups celebrated the pre-Christmas holiday season with special events in 2013<sup>2</sup>. These groups consist of and are led by third and fourth generation descendants of the massive wave of immigration that brought Polish people to Toledo more than 100 years ago. Toledo does not attract large numbers of Polish immigrants currently, as do cities such as Detroit, Chicago, Houston and so on, so Toledo's Polonia is not being linguistically and culturally refreshed as are the groups in other cities. Before the analysis of these Christmas events, a brief examination of the size and history of the Polish American community of Toledo is presented. The paper concludes with an examination of which events have continued or been added, which have folded, and what the future of Toledo Polonian events might look like given the activities of a secular Polish American umbrella organization.

## 1. POLISH AMERICANS IN TOLEDO

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, there were 31,802 Polish Americans in Toledo, which represented 10.1% of the city's population [American Fact Finder: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>, retrieved 21 May, 2019]. The 2017 American Community Survey produced by the Census Bureau put the number of Polish Americans at 23,074, or 8.3% of the total population (American Fact Finder: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>, retrieved 21 May, 2019). While these numbers make it appear as if the Polish American population declined significantly, a fairer analysis of the full data would suggest that the region's Polish American population remained quite high.

Toledo is a city of about 279,455 people located in Lucas County, which according to the 2017 American Community Survey has a population of 433,404 (American Fact Finder: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>, retrieved 21 May, 2019). Of those, 38,056, or 8.8%, identify as Polish American. There is, therefore, a significant Polish American population in both Toledo's city proper, as well as in the region. These numbers do not include the Polish American population

---

<sup>2</sup> In 2013 there were a number of groups in Toledo, Ohio that promoted Polish or Polish American culture. These included the Toledo Area Polka Society, The Toledo Polish Genealogical Society, The International Music Association (since disbanded), The Toledo-Poznań Sister City Alliance, the Polish American Concert Band, the Polish American Community of Toledo, The Alliance of Poles, The Polish Roman Catholic Union of America and the Commodore Club. This paper examines the activities of the Toledo Area Polka Society, the Polish American Concert Band, the Polish American Community of Toledo, The Polish Roman Catholic Union of America, and the Commodore Club.

of Toledo's southern suburbs, because these are located in a different county, Wood County. The 2017 American Community Survey reports that there are 10,121 Polish Americans in Wood County, and many of those reside in suburbs of the city of Toledo, such as Rossford and Perrysburg (American Fact Finder: <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>, retrieved 21 May, 2019). Polish Americans appear to be leaving the city of Toledo in substantial numbers, but the Toledo region remains home to a significant Polish American population.

There were two predominantly Polish American neighborhoods in Toledo: Lagrange (sometimes called Lagrinka, but in this paper referred to as Lagrange) and Kuszwan. Neither is predominantly Polish American anymore, with African-Americans primarily replacing the Polish population. Of the two neighborhoods, Lagrange appears to be in better shape economically, and benefited from a very active neighborhood-based economic development corporation first called Lagrange Development Corporation, but later changed to United North, that purchased and rehabilitated homes, promoted business growth, and engaged in significant community organizing around issues of crime and overall quality of life. They also organized a Polish festival in the neighborhood. The Catholic parish in Kuszwan (St. Anthony of Padua) was closed by the diocese of Toledo in 2005, and one of two parishes in Lagrange (St. Hedwig) closed in 2012<sup>3</sup>. In 2013 there were still a few Polish American oriented businesses in each area, including The Alliance of Poles in Kuszwan, the Commodore Club in Lagrange, and a Polish American meat market in Lagrange called Stanley's Market, which has operated since 1932<sup>4</sup>.

In a study of Chicago's Polonia, Erdmans distinguishes between "ethnic" Polish Americans and "immigrants" [Erdmans 1995: 175–95]. Ethnics are the descendants of the great wave of immigration, while immigrants are more newly arrived. Despite some apparent connections, the needs of the groups are so different that cooperation is nearly impossible. Ethnic Polish Americans maintain an emotional connection with their ancestors' homeland, defend themselves against stereotypes and promote "Polish Pride," and do not speak proper Polish. Immigrants need help finding a job, speak modern Polish, and remember a country far different from the one the ancestors of the ethnics fled at the turn of the last century. For both groups, however, "Polishness" is a meaningful, if very different, part of their lives. The overwhelming majority of the participants in the events described below are best classified as "ethnics."

Analysis of Polish-American ethnicity must account for economic class. Richard Alba presents multiple theories about ethnic identity. In the first of these, "Ethnicity (is) viewed as a working- and lower-class style" [Alba 1990: 27]. Underlying this is the notion that ethnics live and work together, which contributes to their life chances and strengthens their communal feelings. He claims if this theory were true, then, "Ethnic identities should be more common and more salient in lower socioeconomic groups than in higher ones" [Alba 1990: 27]. I do not know the economic background of all of the participants, but I do know the occupations of many of the musicians and organization leaders. Among the occupations of these ethnic leaders are real estate agent, banker, railroad engineer (a skilled position), professional musician,

<sup>3</sup> Technically, it was merged with the other Polish American Parish, St Adalbert, creating the merged St. Hedwig-St. Adalbert parish that utilizes the St. Adalbert buildings.

<sup>4</sup> A pictorial history of Polish Americans in Toledo appears in Richard Philiposki (2009), *Toledo's Polonia*, Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.

pharmacist, mortgage loan officer, and so on. These are not low status or lower-class occupations.

## 2. TOLEDO AREA POLKA SOCIETY

The Toledo Area Polka Society, or TAPS as it is known, was founded in 1982 in an East Toledo garage. The central purpose of the organization had been to present one polka dance per month from September to May. Because of their creation of a wildly popular summer picnic/polka festival held in June in suburban Oregon, Ohio, the group now hosts fewer monthly dances. Originally, the organization held their dances at the LaPark nightclub in the Lagrange neighborhood, but moved them to an American Legion hall on the outskirts of the city when the club closed. The dances have now moved to the Polish Roman Catholic Union of America hall in Toledo. The organization reports that its membership peaked at about 750, but had dropped to fewer than 400 by 2013.

On December 15, 2013 TAPS held their annual Christmas dinner dance. Approximately 175 people attended, mostly the third and fourth generations of Polish Americans, but some young children were in attendance too and received gifts from a member dressed as Santa Claus. Music was provided by local musicians organized as The Czelusta Park All-Stars (styled after a park in the Lagrange neighborhood that was named for a former Polish American Mayor of Toledo). Evoking the Wigilia traditions of Poland, *opłatek* wafers were available on every table, and verbal explanations of what to do with them were given by organization leaders. Table decorations were minimal, including the obligatory poinsettias, but straw was also included, which reflects the Polish tradition of putting straw in Wigilia place settings to evoke the manger in which Jesus Christ was born. On each table were several photocopies of the lyrics to traditional Polish Christmas songs<sup>5</sup>.

The music was performed by a four-piece polka band with accordion, drums, and two trumpets (sometimes one of the trumpet players would play clarinet instead). Songs played included traditional Polish American non-holiday polkas, waltzes, and obereks as well as traditional English-language Christmas songs. The event included performances of traditional Polish-language Christmas carols by a trio of Toledo vocalists: Ed Biegaj, Eric Hite and Rob McMahan. Usually the Polish Christmas music is segregated into just one portion of the performance, between sets of polka music. However, in 2013, due mostly to accidents of scheduling, there were two sets of *kolędy*, which were generally well received by the audience. One 70 year-old female said she was pleased there would be at least two sets of *kolędy*, because when there is only one she feels sad when it ends, because that is the last she will hear of Polish

---

<sup>5</sup> That the event occurred in Advent did not cause any negative comments from participants. This may be because this is when the event is traditionally held, and because in highly assimilated ethnic Catholic communities the liturgical calendar may prevail in church, but less so in people's daily lives. As Obidinski (1987) points out, "...Wigilia' and 'Swieconka' traditions, once restricted to family members in private homes, have become public social events involving dinners and entertainment in public settings," (p. 125) and may therefore be perceived less as religious rituals as community activities. Finally, Fr. Thomas Extejt of the sole remaining parish in one of Toledo's formerly predominantly Polish American neighborhoods reports, "We also do the Christmas Eve supper earlier in December. We rent a hall that is accessible for people with disabilities (our parish hall isn't), and eat together as a parish. People from other parts of Toledo, from Michigan, and even from other parts of the Toledo Diocese will join us. The Bishop has come in the past, but he is often involved with celebrations of Our Lady of Guadalupe".

language music for the season. However, not everyone was pleased by the increased quantity of Christmas music. A 52 year-old who claimed to be speaking for others, asserted that there should be more polka dance music and less kolędy -- that the Polish Christmas music was a distraction from what this respondent believed to be the major purpose of the dinner dance.

Following Hobsbawm, Anders Silverman (1997) calls kolędy singalongs “invented traditions”. Invented traditions are, “a set of practices, of ritual or symbolic nature, which (seek) to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” [Silverman 1997: 25]. This does not mean the events are manufactured out of whole cloth or are inauthentic. They are modern variants of old customs, melded with new activities to celebrate ethnic heritage. Some of the traditions come from the old country, and some from the US. Polka music is a hybrid musical style that does not exist in Poland, but is traditionally associated with Polish-Americans due to their one-time strong embrace of it. The singing of Christmas songs is a tradition that made the trip from Poland to the U.S., and as Stankiewicz Zand reported in 1958, “Christmas was celebrated with scarcely any change from the old world pattern for the first two or three decades of the immigration and even today the principal features survive wherever there is even a small Polish community” [Stankiewicz Zand 1959: 81-90]. Referring to St. Hedwig parish in Trenton, NJ, she reports, “there was a communal Christmas Eve supper...and then followed carol singing by all...” [Stankiewicz Zand 1959: 83]. The polka version of the singalong at Christmas time thus has deep roots in the Polish and Polish American traditions.

How do musicians view their role in promoting and preserving Polish American culture? Ed Biegaj, who was born and raised in Toledo and spent much of his professional life in the area before moving to New Jersey, has been involved as a singer and musician in the polka field for more than 30 years. He said, "I will do anything I can to keep those traditions, songs, dance, et cetera alive and active. The concept of passing on these many great uniquely Polish entities is not only an honor, but my self-proclaimed duty." Clearly Biegaj views his role as something more significant than mere entertainer. More specifically, he views his role as a Polish American musician at Christmas time as partly spiritual: If I can bring someone a little closer to God through song, then I have achieved the greatest of all accomplishments. I feel I have done the greatest job possible when someone comes to me (especially a rough and tough looking man) and says, "I felt the Polish pride in you. It brought back great memories. It made me cry". Personally, at that point, without them saying it, I know I brought them a little closer to the Lord, and that is without equal. Clearly, Biegaj links Christianity and Polish-ness, and this link is expressed through his performance of Polish Christmas songs. He feels pride when he links Polish Americans to their Christianity through the Polish language many of the members of the older generations will remember from their youths.

In 2013, Mike Marek had served as President of TAPS for five years and been a member for 13 years, and also had been active in the Polish American community of Toledo for his entire adult life. He sees a significant decline in participation in, and maintenance of, Polish American traditions, and sees it as not just a generational decline, but can pinpoint fairly specifically when it began. When asked about what motivates him to maintain these traditions, he said, "A pride of being Polish. We were brought up to be proud of being Polish and Americans. Because some of my grandparents were 1st and or 2nd generation, we were exposed to many customs on an ongoing basis. Unfortunately my brothers—10-plus years younger--did not grow

in the same way." Marek was 65 in 2013, so his brothers would have been in their mid-50s then, and for those individuals Marek believes the love and respect for Polish traditions was not instilled to the same degree it was for his generation.

Echoing nearly every Polish American whom I have ever interviewed about this subject, Marek does not believe the future is bright for maintaining Polish traditions. His perspective includes a twist, however: Unfortunately I think that we have seen the better part of our traditions. As our neighborhoods become less Polish, our parish and churches do not carry on with tradition it is only a matter of time. I feel that the Mexican community in Toledo will be going through the same process as they move out of their original neighborhoods. Interestingly, Marek believes other immigrant communities, as they mature, will experience the same "melting" into the dominant American culture and loss of traditions that Polish Americans already have experienced.

### **3. POLISH AMERICAN CONCERT (PAC) BAND**

The Polish American Concert Band has been part of Toledo's cultural scene since 1890. There are about 50 members of the band, including some third and fourth generation members. Every year for the past 33 years the band has performed a Christmas concert the Sunday after Thanksgiving. For many years the concert was performed at suburban Lourdes University's auditorium, but in 2013 the concert was moved back to the partially renovated Ohio Theatre, located near the center of the Lagrange Polish American neighborhood. Attendance dropped in 2013 compared with 2012, and many participants suggested this was because of the change in location. It should be pointed out that not everyone viewed the venue change as negative, or a reflection of Toledo Polish Americans' unwillingness to return to their old neighborhood. Jim Mackiewicz, Sr., who has been a member of the band for decades, and whose son is also a member of the band, said the decreased attendance was not necessarily caused by the community's opposition to returning to the old neighborhood, but believed instead that the numbers would build back up again as they stayed in the same location over time. He suggested that attendance at the suburban location did not start out high, but increased over time as well. Since 2013 the concert band has continued performing in the Lagrange neighborhood, now at the auditorium of the local public high school.

The 2013 concert program followed a pattern the band had been using for the past few years. Forty-eight musicians' names were listed on the program, which began with Jim Rutkowski singing the Polish National Anthem, then another member of the band singing the Star Spangled Banner. Other than that, little of the music performed by the PAC band was Polish in origin. For example, the entire set of tunes played before the intermission consisted of concert band music written by composers such as Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers and J.S. Bach. After the intermission there was a performance by the Honey Creek Preservation Jass Band. After their performance, the PAC Band returned and played one obviously Polish piece: *Polska Powstaje* (Poland Arises), arranged by Fr. Przybylski. During the "Armed Forces Salute" arranged by Bill Moffitt, veterans of the armed forces were asked to stand when the song attached to their branch of the service was played in the medley, and the crowd applauded their service.

Jim Mackiewicz, Jr. first played with the PAC Band around 1988 when he was just 15 years old, and had played with them regularly for 25 years as of 2013. As to why he works to preserve Polish American traditions, he cites the fact that he was raised

with the traditions: I have fond memories of my Christmases as a child, and part of this includes the Polish Traditions -- had the food, music, *opłatek*, etc. not been there, I may have still had the same fond memories, as I fortunately had a great family, however those traditions are what we did and part of what I remember. So, I want my kids to have the same great memories and I'm doing it similarly to the way I was taught/exposed to.

But Mackiewicz also cites other significant reasons for maintaining the Polish American traditions. First, he mentions the joy he experiences as a musician (clarinet and trumpet), when he says, "I simply love polka music – it makes happy, it's lively, it puts me in a good mood." Interestingly, like Marek, he also makes reference to other ethnic groups and their places in American society. "It seems like some ethnic groups--Spanish, Afro-American--are able to influence our society. Polish ways--the accent, the accordion, etc. were historically mocked-- but why is the Spanish language now included, when the Polish was shunned/hidden? Why can black Americans style, slang language, etc. now be incorporated into American culture? Even if in our own house, I'm not buying into everyone else's America – I'm proud of and keeping my ethnic background."

Mackiewicz's concerns echo those I have heard from a number of Polish Americans of the fourth generation or later. Their parents, raised in the assimilationist 1940s and 1950s, either never learned or never taught their kids the Polish language, or both. These kids in turn grew up feeling as if they had missed something, and may resent other ethnic groups that have been encouraged through multiculturalism and bilingualism to value their culture and protect their languages in ways that Polish and other immigrants from earlier times were not. They feel as if these ethnic Americans have been encouraged to share their ethnicity, while Polish Americans hid theirs and were mocked through one of the cruelest verbal manifestations of ethnic hatred: the Polish joke. There is also a sense in which they seem to feel as if it is too late now to get back what has been lost. As Jim Mackiewicz, Jr. puts it: I think there could be more of a Polish Community... looking forward to a Saturday wedding or a Sunday dance are things of the past. I think that people may be more willing to come out, but it might take someone to ask them. We have gotten busy and sometimes it's easier to stay home and watch your high-def TV. Another problem is that we've spread out, it was easier when there were predominantly "Polish neighborhoods" – the baby-boomers moved out and their kids –me- have even gone farther. I don't think this will ever change back.

While Mackiewicz, Jr. and others envy black and Latino Americans because the dominant culture absorbs aspects of their ethnic culture or has allowed them to preserve their language, these respondents also recognize that Polish Americans have contributed to their own culture's decline by moving out of the old ethnic neighborhoods, shunning the Polish aspects of their background, and instead assimilating into and consuming American mass culture.

#### **4. POLISH ROMAN CATHOLIC UNION OF AMERICA (PRCUA) AND COMMODORE CLUB**

The PRCUA claims to be the oldest Polish fraternal organization in the U.S., having been founded in 1873. According to their website, "...(the) PRCUA is committed to strengthening and preserving spiritual values, patriotic zeal, its ethnic culture, heritage, and fostering of cultural relations between the United States of America and Poland." They also sell life insurance and annuities.



In mid-December of 2013 the Toledo lodge sponsored a Christmas sing-along in the evening. Three musicians performed: accordionist and vocalist Randy Krajewski, concertina player, vocalist and drummer Ed Biegaj, and accordionist/keyboardist and vocalist Eric Hite. The reader may note the frequent recurrence of many of the names of the musicians at the various Polish American events. This is a problem long noted by proponents of the folk/polka music side of Polish American traditions, namely, the small and dwindling number of musicians. Ever since the electric guitar replaced the accordion as the go-to instrument for American kids in the 1950s, this problem has been evident. It gets worse every year, as musicians retire or die and few rise up to take their places.

The group played a mixture of Polish and English language Christmas songs, with the majority including English language vocals. Lyric sheets were provided for the Polish language songs, which were confined mainly in a group around the half-way point of the evening. Participants also provided a wide selection of foods served in a potluck setting, most of which were not Polish in their origins. However, there were two large crock pots of non-smoked Polish kielbasa available, with strong horseradish sauce served as well.

Compared with the previous year, attendance was down at 2013's event. Fewer than 100 people attended, and there were various explanations for the decrease. Some people believed that the novelty of the event had worn off, so fewer people were interested in venturing out on a cold winter's night. Others speculated that the crowd was so large the previous year, when it was standing room only, that many people stayed home fearing they would not be able to get a seat.<sup>6</sup> Playing at both the PRCUA and Commodore Club events was multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Eric Hite. His primary reason for playing Polish American music is the pleasure of playing with other talented musicians: Camaraderie with the guys is a huge thing! The fact that you can get together with a group of musicians who know their arrangements and are worth their salt as musicians is always very rewarding. Even if we all don't play together on a regular basis, the fact that we can just get together, get on stage and play a good job is way cool!

His interest does not stop there, but also includes the desire to promote Polish American music among those who think either that it is not "cool," or it is just something that their parents and grandparents were interested in, but has no relevance for them today: Trying to preserve our Polish heritage/culture is another (reason for playing the music). Getting people to realize that yes, it actually can be cool! That's the labor of love part... I guess many people don't see a need for it but I believe it is something that is very important to hold onto/preserve. There is not much left around these parts when it comes to dances, neighborhoods, churches, and overall Polish culture in general. I think it's important to remind people that it still exists and there are some of us that are very proud of it and take it very seriously!

The sense of loss expressed by many of my informants, both those quoted in this paper and not, is almost overwhelming, yet completely appropriate. They are keenly aware of the closing of Polish American parishes, the decline of neighborhoods, the decreasing number of bands, venues and festivals. They observe it at the individual level, as well as the community level when they talk about families not passing down the traditions, and institutions of Polonia dying as well. These phenomena are not

---

<sup>6</sup> One is reminded of what baseball legend Yogi Berra allegedly once claimed: "That place, it's so crowded nobody goes there anymore."

unique to Toledo, but are common in many big city Polonias. For each new polka band that starts up, there seem to be many more who retire. This became a problem from the business end of things when the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences dropped the Polka category in 2009. The category was created in 1986, and was won by big-band leader Jimmy Sturr 18 times. The Academy justified dropping the award by claiming doing so was necessary to "to ensure the awards process remains representative of the current musical landscape." Of course, polka musicians were deeply offended by the decision, taking it as a slap in the face against their style of music. But on message boards and in chat rooms, some musicians recognized that there had been a decline in the number of recordings submitted, and that Sturr's winning it so often decreased the credibility of the award anyway.

## **5. THE COMMODORE CLUB**

The Commodore Club is the last club in the Lagrange neighborhood with large numbers of Polish American members.<sup>7</sup> It provides a clubhouse for members to drink in and socialize. In 2013 their Christmas dinner included a performance of area Polish American polka musicians headed by Randy Krajewski, and included many of the musicians mentioned above. The band played polkas, waltzes and obereks and a healthy helping of kolędy were sung as well. Club member response to the event was decidedly mixed. Some of the members did not appreciate the large crowd of non-members taking seating away from members, nor did they like the loudly amplified accordions, brass and vocals drowning out their conversation. Others marveled at the large number of highly talented polka musicians playing together on one stage, and expressed joy at hearing the Polish-language vocals of the Christmas and secular music.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Toledo's Polonia, like many others in the US, is no longer defined by geographic borders of specific neighborhoods anchored by Catholic churches, and all of the businesses and services an ethnic or any other neighborhood could need. Instead, Toledo area Polish Americans live scattered across city and suburbs, and gather together only at Catholic mass, parish and secular festivals, and special events like the Christmas events described above. Since 2013, the landscape of Polish American events in Toledo has changed somewhat. The Commodore Club and PRCUA do not have Polish American Christmas events anymore, and the International Music Association has folded. After a more than 30-year run, the Lagrange Street Polish festival has not happened since 2016, although a return is being planned by its former organizers and others. On the plus side, the Holy Toledo Polka Days festival returned in the spring of 2019 after a long hiatus, and the Polish American Community of Toledo (PACT), an umbrella organization founded in 2009, has created a new festival, which was held in suburban Toledo for the first time in 2018.

PACT's Mission Statement describes four goals:

- To help promote, support, and patronize locally owned Polish American businesses and business owners.
- To promote, join and support local and national groups and organizations that sponsor or otherwise promote events that perpetuate Polish culture and/or tradition.

---

<sup>7</sup> Randy Krajewski reports the club currently has about 200 members.

- To further the image of our proud Polish heritage and our local Polonia.
- To hold and promote fundraisers and other programs that will help fund scholarships for local students.
- To build a Polish-American Community Center that will ultimately house a cultural center, library, youth recreation center, and provide a venue for local Polish American groups to hold their activities.

Besides organizing the new festival, the group has also sponsored golf scrambles, the showing of Polish films, and a kielbasa cookoff described in more detail below.

The new festival did not occur without some controversy. Calling itself “A Real Polish American Festival,” the advertising for the new event promised that, “the upcoming festival will be quite different from the more recent Polish festivals... It will be held in a beautiful 20-acre park-like setting and the major focus of the event will be to exhibit true Polish American culture through music, food, entertainment and the arts.” These claims, as well as its name, drew skepticism and even some ire among Toledo-area Polish Americans who perceived it all as an attack on the authenticity of the original Lagrange Street festival, which had changed over time to include much non-Polish food. Stanley’s Market, the venerably purveyor of kielbasa and all other things Polish in the Lagrange neighborhood for 87 years, did not participate in the new festival in its first year, but agreed to participate in the second year, and advertising for the event in 2019 did not emphasize authenticity.

Approximately 1,300 people attended PACT’s 8th Kielbasa Cook-Off on Sunday, February 24th, 2019. Held at the hall of St. Clement Roman Catholic Church on Toledo’s northwest side, the event featured kielbasa provided by nine amateur producers. One could purchase 50 food tickets for \$20.00. Each sample of kielbasa cost just one ticket, so much sausage could be had for a fairly small price. Also, for two tickets, one could purchase sweet and sour cabbage or mizeria. A few tickets also purchased a slice of placek or a paczek.

The nine sausage makers were Busia’s Old Fashion Kielbasa, Z Best Kielbasa, Ski’s Sausage, Dziadzia & Busia’s Old Fashion Recipe, Zbilski Kielbasa, Oink K. Basa, Team Kazlo, Chet’s Best Kielbasa, and Lenny & Spud’s Fresh Kielbasa. The kielbasa purveyors were arranged around the perimeter of the hall, and customers came to them with plates already partially filled with the other delicacies. Each piece of kielbasa contained a toothpick with a number, so patrons could vote on their favorite. Importantly, professional sausage-makers were excluded from the event, because, “(w)e want to taste that secret family recipe for kielbasa,” according to Jack Sparagowski, the Chairman of PACT.

The sausages varied by casing style (some had the traditional snap of natural casing, others did not), fineness of the grind of the meat, fat content, and spice combinations. The sausages were served from large warmers, and had been boiled, and in some instances browned a little. I did not see any smoked kielbasa on offer.

Other Polish foods in frozen form were available for purchase to take home. Busia’s Pierogi Shack had frozen pierogi with various traditional and modern fillings available, as well as frozen soups such as chicken noodle and dill pickle.

Background music for the event was provided by the author (who is also the host of the Sunday Morning Polka Show of Northwest Ohio) and played over a speaker system. The music consisted of a sampling of polka music from Toledo bands from the past and present.

These events sponsored by PACT place that organization front and center of Toledo’s Polonia in terms of sponsoring events designed to raise money and bring Toledo’s

Polish American community together. In this sense they may be replacing other organizations both secular (United North) and religious, but not necessarily in a way that usurps the other organizations, as their capacity has significantly diminished. According to Fr. Thomas Extejt, Pastor of Saints Adalbert and Hedwig Parish (the combined parish formed after the closure of St. Hedwig, and the sole remaining parish in either of Toledo's formerly predominantly Polish neighborhoods), the parish attempts to maintain some Polish Christmas traditions during the Advent and Christmas seasons. He said, "There is a strong desire to hang on to Polish Christmas customs. Plenty of people buy Christmas wafers (oplatki) from us, and I know that some of our customers are from parishes where not many Polish people live." In this case, the parish assists Polish Americans who are isolated from others to celebrate Wigilia.

Regarding Midnight Mass, Fr. Extejt reports, "in many of our neighborhoods it is not safe after dark, and 'midnight' Mass has been moved to an earlier hour. We've moved it back all the way to 4 p.m! I think we sing English carols before Mass starts, and Polish carols during Mass." Perhaps for some the changing of the time of Midnight Mass to an earlier hour is a step too far, however it does show the flexibility of the parish in accounting for the needs of its aging members and the realities of their location.

Is there a suburban/urban divide within the Toledo area's Polonia? While many of the area's Polish Americans reside within the city limits, many of these do not live in either formerly predominantly Polish American neighborhoods, but instead live in neighborhoods on the outskirts. As mentioned above, many live in the suburbs. The original formulation of the new festival raised the possibility of such a divide, but given that the organization changed its focus in 2019 sufficiently to bring in the old neighborhood's last Polish market, perhaps the divide is more illusory than real. Also, while PACT held its festival in the suburbs, it held its kielbasa cookoff in the city, and plans to build its cultural center in Toledo.

Musician Ed Biegaj does not believe there is a suburban/urban divide. Referring to the creation of the new Polish festivals in the suburbs and the potential for reviving the festival in the city, he said, "Some people would say that the two groups oppose one another and are looking to destroy the other festival for the sake of their own festival winning favoritism. And although there may be some individuals who have that very thing happen, it is my belief that the majority of people involved on both sides would like to see both thrive."

Despite these controversies and changes, the Polish American community of Toledo continues to sponsor events throughout the year that allow Polish Americans to experience their culture and to share it with others. Organizers of these events adapt to new realities of population distribution and the preferences of attendees. But a Polish American presence remains. For most Toledo Polish Americans the ethnic experience may in fact be one that is symbolic and able to be turned on or off, but as the evidence above demonstrates, it is not therefore contentless or inauthentic.

## REFERENCES

- Alba, R. D., (1990), *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bayor, R. H., (2009), Another Look at 'Whiteness': The Persistence of Ethnicity in American Life, in *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 29(1), pp. 13-30.
- Erdmans, M. P., (1995), Immigrants and Ethnics: Conflict and Identity in Polish Chicago, in *Sociological Quarterly*, 36(1), pp. 175-95.
- Erdmans, M. P., (2000), Polonia in the New Century: We Will Not Fade Away, in *Polish American Studies*, 57(1), pp. 5-24.
- Gans, G. J., (1979), Symbolic Ethnicity: the Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America, in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2, pp. 1-20.
- Jackson, D., & Liggett, L., (2018), Political and Cultural Beliefs of Young Polish Americans, in *Diaspora polska w Ameryce Polnocnej*, ed. R. Raczyński & K. Morawska, Gdynia: Emigration Museum in Gdynia.
- Obidinski, E. E., & Stankiewicz Zand, H., (1987), *Polish Folkways in America*, Lanham: MD.
- Philiposki R., (2009), *Toledo's Polonia*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing.
- Silverman, A. D., (1997), Dyngus Days and Koledy Nights: Folk Celebrations in Polish-American Communities, in *New York Folklore*, 23(1-4), pp. 25-38.
- Smajda, J. & Gerteis, J., (2012), Ethnic Community and Ethnic Boundaries in a 'Sauce-Scented Neighborhood', in *Sociological Forum*, 27(3), pp. 617-640.
- Stankiewicz Zand, H., (1959), Polish American Holiday Customs, in *Polish American Studies*, 15(3-4).
- Waters, M. C., (1991), *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.