

Polish Immigrant Community Building in Brussels: The Role of the Polish Catholic Mission*

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This paper provides the first outline of the history of the Polish Catholic Mission (PCM) in Belgium, focusing on its role in the Polish immigrant community from 1926 to 2023. It examines the transformation of the PCM and its impact on the Polish diaspora, considering the broader context of secularization and social changes. The study utilizes primary sources, interviews, and participant observations to explore the PCM's influence on community building, cultural preservation, and social capital formation within the Polish immigrant population in Belgium.

Keywords: Polish diaspora, immigration, Catholic Mission, pastoral care, catholic community, history.

The text offers a sketch of the Polish Catholic Mission (hereinafter PCM) in Belgium and its transformation over the course of a century (more precisely, between 1926 and 2023).¹ Although a great deal of research has been done on the Polish diaspora in Belgium,² no systematic history has been written about this institution, which became a center of leadership for both the Polish-speaking pastoral ministry and the Polish immigrant community in Belgium.³ We show that, while it was a conservative institution, the Polish Catholic Mission maintained its role as one of the key places of Polish activity in Belgium, despite an ongoing process of secularization.

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1 The Polish Catholic Mission changed its name in 2018 to the Polish Catholic Community.

2 Eder, *Dzieje Polonii belgijskiej*; Goddeeris, *De Poolse migratie in België*; Goddeeris, *Polonia belgijska*; Goddeeris, *La Grande émigration polonaise*; Caestecker, “Polish Migrants’ Children.”

3 Szymański, “Obraz duszpasterstwa polskojęzycznego,” 361.

The study is based on a critical analysis of the literature, including primary sources (newsletters, memoirs, immigrant press, webpages), and participant observation and interviews. The primary sources which were examined are stored at the KADOC center at the Catholic University in Leuven and at the archive of the Polish Catholic Mission. The interviews were conducted in a recent study with Polish immigrants and Polish priests, but citations from interviews conducted in previous studies are also used here.⁴

The process of organizing and changing the Mission is shown in the context of the local Polish immigrant community and in the broader context of the receiving society. Launched in Brussels in 1926, the Polish Catholic Mission initially addressed the needs of Polish Catholics in Belgium, and in 1927, it extended its activities to the Netherlands, Luxemburg, and Denmark.⁵ The text focuses on the Belgian part of the story. It provides a brief information of the Polish group in Belgium (part one), a basic chronology and data on the Polish Catholic Mission (part two), and an analysis of the changing functions of the PCM within the context of the Polish group in Belgium (part three).

Due to limited space, the text is devoted to the history of ethnic Poles, but it is worth keeping in mind that the influx from Polish lands also brought Polish Jews in the early twentieth century and the interwar period, as well as members of the Belarusian minority from the region of Podlasie since the late 1980s.

Polish immigrants in Belgium managed to build their own world in the new *milieu*. In migration studies, this process is theorized as immigrant community building.⁶ In the case of this community, this process began in the nineteenth century, with each stream of Polish immigrants both contributing to and benefiting from the community. A network of institutions and relationships that comprised an immigrant community/immigrant communities embraced many newcomers.⁷ An ethnic institutional completeness⁸ has never been achieved, but the communities made it possible for newcomers to find their anchor in a new surroundings.⁹ In general, Poles oriented themselves towards their home country, their host society, and their immigrant community, which bridged the

4 Kuźma, “Życie codzienne imigrantów polskich”; Grzymala-Kazłowska, “Sieci społeczne i kapitał migrancki”; Leszczyńska et al., *Poza granicami*.

5 Szymański, “Początki Polskiej Misji Katolickiej w Belgii.”

6 Sanders and Morawska, *Polish-American Community Life*; Bruneau, “Diasporas, transnational spaces and communities”; Boyd, “How ‘Ethnic’ Were White Ethnic Neighborhoods?”

7 Sardinha, *Immigrant associations, integration and identity*.

8 Breton, “Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities.”

9 Grzymala-Kazłowska, *Rethinking settlement and integration*.

two. Today, researchers refer to this ability to create a new space in which migrants function on a daily basis across ethnic and state borders as transnationalism.¹⁰ Another concept that is useful in interpreting the findings of our study is social capital,¹¹ which is produced in immigrant communities in a dense net of daily interactions. Bonding social capital is inward-oriented and contributes to internal social cohesion, while bridging social capital is produced in interactions with the new environment and with other immigrant groups.¹²

The Polish community in Belgium was made and remade, invented and reinvented by the successive streams of immigrants.¹³ The process of immigrants' integration and their participation in cultural life of the host society was eased by the fact that the ethnic community helped them overcome the cultural shock that they experienced upon arrival.¹⁴ The community structures initiated by the first generation of each wave of immigrants often served the immigrants who arrived later.

The study challenges the traditional paradigms of the ethnic studies developed in the 1960s and 1970s, which portrayed ethnicity as “an insider identity generated in largely closed minority communities whose members struggle in the interaction with society at large.”¹⁵ The case of Poles in Belgium makes such an understanding of ethnicity inadequate, which is why one of the concepts underlying the study presented here is the New Architecture of Ethnic Studies (NAES). This new approach shows that ethnicity, as practiced or experienced by recent immigrants, allows and even facilitates the crossing of ethnic boundaries.¹⁶

There are many studies on the role of religion in the lives of immigrants.¹⁷ As Yang and Ebaugh observe, “Historically, religious institutions were among the most important resources that immigrant groups used to reproduce their ethno-religious identity in a new surrounding and to help them adjust to the challenges of surviving in a demanding and often threatening environment.”¹⁸

10 Faist, “Diaspora and transnationalism.”

11 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

12 Ibid.

13 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*; Neils et al., “The Invention of Ethnicity.”

14 Levrau et al., “Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004,” 316.

15 Lesser, “Remaking Ethnic Studies,” 7.

16 Barth, “Introduction.”

17 Foley and Hoge, *Religion and the New Immigrants*; Foner and Alba, “Immigrant Religion”; Beckford, “Religions and migrations – old and new.”

18 Yang and Ebaugh, “Transformations in New Immigrant Religions,” 269.

This is certainly the case with the Polish Catholic Mission, which underwent significant evolution, changing its name to the Polish Catholic Community in 2018 and retaining its role as one of the key places of Polish activity in Belgium.

Polish Immigration to Belgium

Poland, a country with a population of about thirty-eight million (2022), has been left by at least seven million inhabitants over the course of the last two centuries.¹⁹ Massive outflow began in the mid-nineteenth century, reached its peak in the early twentieth century, and continues to this day with a few interruptions. Emigration produced several centers of Polish diaspora, the largest in the United States but also in Germany, France, and Great Britain. Other popular destinations include Brazil, Canada, Argentina, Australia, and Sweden.²⁰ Belgium and the Netherlands received only a small portion of the Polish outflow, yet Poles built visible immigrant communities there.²¹ In the 1830s these communities, began to be formed by successive streams of newcomers from the Polish lands. The influx included both political refugees and migrants who came in search of work.

The Polish diaspora communities in Belgium consisted of various groups of immigrants and their descendants: political refugees of the failed uprisings (who arrived in the 1830s and 1860s), Polish students at the postsecondary schools (Antwerpen, Liege, Glon near Liege, Leuven), migrants who came in search of work in the early twentieth century and the interwar period, World War II refugees, political and economic immigrants from communist Poland, including Solidarity refugees, migrants in search of work in the period of political transition (since 1989), and migrants who were and are taking advantage of greater mobility following Poland's accession to the EU. Each wave of immigration stream had its particular social profile and contributed to the internal diversity of the immigrant group. While discussing its past and present, historians often tend to oversimplify the situation, usually focusing on working class communities because immigrants who come in search of work were and are the most numerous. As migration research shows, economic migration prevails in international flows, and this has been true in the case of waves of Polish

19 Walaszek, *Polska diaspora*, 9.

20 Praszalowicz, "Poland."

21 Eder, *Dzięje Polonii belgijskiej*; Eder, "Diaspora polska w Belgii i Holandii"; Goddeeris, *De Poolse migratie in België*.

migration. However, political motivations to migrate were usually intertwined with economic considerations. As Norman Davies has noted, in the nineteenth century, when Poland was partitioned, “The émigrés who stayed abroad because their lands and property had been sequestered, or because they lost their source of livelihood in a home district annexed by a foreign power, were reacting as much to economic as to political factors.”²² The same interplay between political and economic factors in the decision to migrate can be found in the case of the outflow from communist Poland as well.²³

It should be noted that this outflow did not stop with the fall of communism (1989), when Poland embarked down the path towards political transition and the free market. In fact, economic reforms of the 1990s (which initially resulted in high unemployment rates) and Polish accession to the EU in 2004 brought new streams of migration to the West, and Belgium became a popular destination for Poles. In 1991, Polish citizens were given an exemption from visa requirements in Belgium, and in 2009, Belgium opened its labor market to Poles. The influx that started in 1990s initially resulted in the undocumented employment of many Poles. At the time, circular migration became common, especially with Polish women working in Belgium for a few months, returning to Poland for a few months, and then coming to Belgium again.²⁴ After 2009, most immigrants were able to legalize their status.

It is very difficult to determine precisely the actual size of migration flows, so we quote various estimates here. Currently, the estimated size of the Polish group in Belgium fluctuates around 60,000, including more than 43,000 Polish citizens.²⁵ This number includes not only members of the first generation of Polish immigrants, but also members of the second and third generations. According to the population census conducted in Belgium in 1930, 48,840 Polish citizens resided in the country, including around 23,000 Polish Jews.²⁶ In 1935, PCM rector Fr. Ryszard Moskwa estimated the group of Polish Catholics in Belgium at 24,000.²⁷ In 1939, it was estimated that there were around 60,000

22 Davies, *Heart of Europe*, 223.

23 Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia?*

24 Grzymala-Kazłowska, “Polscy nielegalni pracownicy”; Levrau et al., “Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004.”

25 Goddeeris, *Fabryka płótek*; Levrau et al., “Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004,” 310.

26 Szymański, “Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego,” 30.

27 Szymański, “Obraz duszpasterstwa polskojęzycznego,” 372.

immigrants from Poland in Belgium, half of whom were Polish Catholics and half of whom were Polish Jews.²⁸

The main Polish communities were found in the industrial regions of Liege, Limburg, and Hainaut (Charleroi, Mons, and the central area between them).²⁹ During World War II, many Polish men who fought alongside the Western Allies ended up in the Benelux countries and took part in the fighting against the Nazi forces.³⁰ After the war, there was a chaotic migration reshuffle. Poles who did not want to return to the communist country stayed in Belgium. This group included earlier immigrants and Polish Displaced Persons, many Polish soldiers among them.³¹ On the other hand, several thousand Poles left, deciding simply to return home.³²

In the Polish collective memory,³³ it is believed that the outflow of people from the country was the result of political oppression. In other words, the political dimension of the outflow is overestimated and the economic dimension is underestimated. In a sense, the heroic narrative of Polish émigré streams dominates Polish historiography.³⁴ As nineteenth-century Polish publicist and independence agitator Maurycy Mochnacki famously contended, Polish emigration “has its own separate, historical character, not similar to the emigration of any other contemporary people [...]. We are soldiers of the independence of our country, citizens of the future Poland.”³⁵

This perception was shaped by the nineteenth-century Polish refugees who became diaspora leaders and understood their situation in exile as a continuation of the fight for the Polish cause. According to their speeches, memoirs, personal letters, and publications, the refugees believed that, while living abroad, they had a national mission to fulfill, i.e., they felt responsible for Polish cultural continuity, including Polish Catholicism. Indeed, many exiles in the nineteenth century were well-known figures who became symbols of Polish patriotism. Among the refugees from the uprisings there were several dozen officers and representatives of culture and science, among them Joachim Lelewel, an outstanding Polish historian and spiritual guide in a diaspora democratic camp who spent almost

28 Dzwonkowski, “Polacy w Belgii.”

29 Goddeeris, *Polonia belgijska w pierwszych latach*, 15–26; Dzwonkowski, “Polacy w Belgii,” 12.

30 Goddeeris, *Polonia belgijska w pierwszych latach*; Venken, *Straddling the Iron Curtain?*

31 Caestecker, “Polish Migrants’ Children”; Venken, “Międzynarodowe i lokalne próby.”

32 Kulesa and Nisiobęcka, “The Migration of Poles to Belgium.”

33 Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

34 Goddeeris, *Polonia belgijska w pierwszych latach*.

35 Maurycy Mochnacki cited in Gul-Rechlewicz, “Poles in Belgium,” 648.

three decades in Belgium (1833–1861), and Stanisław Worcell, thinker and social activist of the Great Emigration.³⁶ Another important element of the heroic history is related to Polish involvement in the Allied Forces and the anti-Nazi underground movement during World War II.³⁷ The focus on heroism and martyrdom in Polish history, both on Polish soil and in the diaspora, is evident in the profile of patriotic activities organized by the Polish Catholic Mission in Belgium. Examples are given later in this discussion.

The Polish group in Belgium was often compared to the Polish diaspora center in France.³⁸ This comparison is important because in the nineteenth century, Paris became the main center of Polish (unsuccessful) patriotic mobilization for the reestablishment of an independent Polish state. However, life in the diaspora could not focus solely on the old country. Everyday challenges prompted and compelled members of the émigré community to orient themselves towards the host society. Therefore, on the one hand side, there was a narrative about Polish refugees and their patriotic mission, while on the other, there was a more complex reality. The reality of the diaspora included both the integration process and ethnic community building. Subsequent generations of Polish immigrants integrated and dispersed in the host society, especially in the case of those born into binational families.³⁹ Moreover, hope for social advancement was usually an incentive for immigrants to go beyond the (symbolic) boundaries of their ethnic group.⁴⁰

The migration path that led Poles to Belgium in the twentieth century is an interesting and little researched topic. Many Polish migrants who traveled to Belgium in search of work came directly from Polish lands before and after World War I, but a significant group came from Germany and France during this period. A priest who ministered to Poles in the interwar period estimated that only one third of the Poles in Belgium came from Poland, while one third came from Germany and another third from France.⁴¹ We are dealing here with multiple migrations that involved living and working in the diaspora prior to arrival in Belgium. These migrants moved to Belgium in search of better

36 Ibid., 639.

37 Panecki, *Polonia w belgijskim ruchu oporu*; Venken, “The Communist ‘Polonia’ Society”; Venken, *Straddling the Iron Curtain?*

38 Gul-Rechlewicz, “Poles in Belgium,” 639; Dzwonkowski, “Polacy w Belgii,” 7.

39 Levrau et al., “Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004,” 313; Dzwonkowski, “Polacy w Belgii,” 10–11, 15.

40 Barth, “Introduction”; Grzymala-Kazłowska, “Introduction: Rethinking integration.”

41 Szymański, “Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego,” 32.

opportunities from industrial regions in Germany (Westphalia) and France (Pas de Calais and Nord), where Polish men were employed in coal mines. In the case of Westphalian Poles, another major push factor was the requirement to take the German citizenship if the migrant wanted to remain in the country after World War I.⁴² This push factor, rooted in the migrants' attachment to their identity as Poles (the decision not to accept German citizenship), can be seen as cultural and political rather than economic. However, the labor market in Belgium (coal mines and work that Polish men were used to) proved a strong pulling force. This shows the interplay of various incentives in the decision to migrate.

Polish families brought with them from Germany and France a tradition of establishing ethnic institutions and associations, which during their stay in Belgium proved helpful in the process of building new immigrant communities.⁴³ The experiences of working-class immigrant communities were thus added to the nineteenth-century traditions of refugee activities. The spiritual connection between waves of immigration, old and new, working-class and intellectual, is exemplified in the name of the (Polish student) Lelewel Society in Brussels.⁴⁴

From the perspective of gender, in the refugee streams in the nineteenth century, men predominated. In turn, the Polish economic migrations involved primarily single men and families.⁴⁵ World War II brought soldiers to Belgium, meaning men, but the group of people referred to as Displaced Persons consisted of both men and women. Emigration from communist Poland involved both sexes, including the Solidarity refugees: families, single men, and single women. Polish immigration to Belgium in recent decades, however, has been dominated by women.⁴⁶ Many of these Polish women have decided to stay, however, and they brought their nuclear families to Belgium, while earlier they had perceived migration as a short term solution or circular move.⁴⁷

Today, the migration process has slowed or halted shifts in gender roles on the labor market. Most men are employed in traditionally male occupations, for instance the construction and renovation of buildings and as truck drivers, and most women are employed in typically female jobs, for instance as caretakers, nannies and babysitters, and cleaning staff.⁴⁸ However, "in a recent study on female

42 Praszalowicz, "Polish Berlin."

43 Szymański, "Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego," 34; Dzwonkowski, "Polacy w Belgii," 16.

44 Szymański, "Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego," 32.

45 Goddeeris, *Polonia belgijska w pierwszych latach*, 15–26.

46 Grzymala-Kazłowska, "Polscy nielegalni pracownicy"; Baluk, "Integracja polskich rodzin w Belgii."

47 Levrau et al., "Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004," 311.

48 Grzymala-Kazłowska, "Polscy nielegalni pracownicy"; Baluk, "Integracja polskich rodzin w Belgii."

migration in Belgium [...] it was found that women often perceived migration as an empowering experience: it not only strengthened their economic situations but also changed their intra-familial and gender positions for the better.”⁴⁹ The most recent study which analyzes changes in the PCM focuses entirely on gender roles within this group.⁵⁰ Its authors closely examine the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity (minority status), and they demonstrate that Polish women must fight if they want to exercise agency. In this context, it should be noted that Polish migrants often have been working below their skill level. This situation is gradually changing, with more and more Polish men and women finding jobs in Belgium that are compatible with their education and/or getting education in Belgium to improve their position on the labor market.⁵¹

Polish Catholic Mission – Basic Information

In the case of waves of Polish migration, the religious dimension of the diaspora experience is clear. In most diaspora centers, Poles established their churches and developed an immigrant community around them.⁵² The initiative usually came from the bottom up, with immigrants raising funds to start their own churches and cover maintenance costs. They sent petitions to the Church hierarchy to get Polish clergy. It was a grass-roots activity, but a Polish priest often became the leader of a local group. However, the Polish group in Belgium differed significantly from that in countries with the largest Polish diasporas. Unlike in the religiously pluralistic United States, where Catholics were in minority, or France, where the process of secularization was already well underway, in Belgium, Polish immigrants joined the religious majority. Nevertheless, their religiosity, strongly associated with Polish national and folk culture, differed from the religious patterns they encountered in Belgium. They tried to exert some control over the situation by setting up their own structures. In Belgium, the initiative came from above.

Another important aspect was the existence of several pillars on which the social engagement of the Catholic Church in Belgium rested. From its foundation in 1830 in the wake of the Belgian Revolution, Belgium was a Catholic state,

49 Levräu et al., “Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004,” 305.

50 Leszczyńska et al., *Poza granicami*.

51 Levräu et al., “Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004”; Bałuk, “Integracja polskich rodzin w Belgii,” 87.

52 Walaszek, *Polska diaspora*.

and the Catholic Church controlled education, culture, and charity. Thus, the endeavors of immigrants in these fields necessarily took place within the existing Church structures. Cooperatives, sick funds, trade unions, volunteer associations, the school system, and a Catholic party (from 1921) were the pillars of the institutionalized Catholic system.⁵³ Ironically, however, it was more difficult for Poles in Belgium to become part of this established system than it was for Poles in the religiously diverse but nonetheless predominantly Protestant United States to establish ethnic parishes and schools.

On January 1, 1926, through the efforts of August Hlond, primate of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, and with the approval of Cardinal Désiré Joseph Mercier, the Polish Catholic Mission in Belgium was established.⁵⁴ Its purpose was to provide pastoral care for Polish immigrants. A year later, the scope of activity was expanded to the Netherlands, Luxemburg, and Denmark. The Mission, which is a church organizational unit, was responsible for the organization and development of the religious life of the Polish immigrants. The pastoral activities of the Mission were the same as those of any parish in Poland and included celebrating services, administering the sacraments, receiving confessions, granting absolution, and providing religious instruction. The main task of the PCM rector was to organize pastoral care so that every Polish local community would have access to a Polish priest. This was difficult since the communities were numerous and dispersed. Another crucial challenge was to organize religious instruction in Polish. Due to the lack of priests, the first PCM rector, Fr. Kotowski, trained a group of parishioners representing scattered communities and supplied them with catechisms and songbooks.⁵⁵

Pastoral care by Polish clergy was and still is essential, as many Polish workers in Belgium either spoke neither French nor Flemish or had difficulty with the languages. Until the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), Catholic masses were celebrated in Latin, to which Poles were accustomed, but listening to sermons, singing hymns, and giving confession in French or Flemish seemed alien to immigrants. As diaspora studies indicate, it was often difficult for immigrants to give confession in a foreign language, so they avoided doing so, even though the Roman Catholic Church requires one to give confession at least once a year.⁵⁶ The Polish Episcopate was aware of this, and in 1921, it issued a decree

53 Dobbelaere and Voye, "From Pillar to Postmodernity," 2.

54 Szymański, "Początki Polskiej Misji Katolickiej w Belgii."

55 Rosowski, "Ksiądz Dr Tadeusz Kotowski," 158.

56 Dziedzic, "Zjawisko migracji Polaków."

recognizing pastoral care for Poles living abroad as necessary. In 1969, the legal situation of churches in the diaspora was regulated by the papal decree *Pastoralis Migratorum Cura*.⁵⁷

The first PCM rector Fr. Tadeusz Kotowski (1926–28) established eight places of Polish pastoral care in Belgium and one in the Netherlands.⁵⁸ Before coming to Belgium, he studied in France (Lyon, Nancy) and worked in Polish communities in the industrial regions of France, so he was accustomed to ministering among working-class immigrants.⁵⁹ The second rector, Fr. Ludwik Kudlacik (1928–1935), also spent several years in France before being assigned to the PCM in Belgium. Both had official contacts with the Belgian Church hierarchy, as well as with the Polish bishops of their home dioceses, where they had worked before their departure. Both left rich correspondence with their Polish bishops, through which we gain some insight into the challenges they faced in their daily activities.⁶⁰ Their actions were financially supported by Polish Roman Catholic Church and by the Polish Consulates (Brussels, Antwerpen). Thus, in addition to being subjects of the Belgian and Polish bishops, PCM rectors had to know how to navigate the world of diplomats and politicians. There was one more influential actor in the puzzle: the workplace. The owners of the coal mines where the immigrants were employed supported the Polish pastoral ministry. They offered places of worship and education and funded libraries, and in return, they expected the Mission to provide priests.⁶¹ This, however, was extremely difficult and caused frustration, and the PCM rectors expressed their dissatisfaction with the situation. In addition, the material support from all sides proved insufficient. The Mission rectors struggled financially, especially during the Great Depression.

In 1939, the Polish Catholic Mission was entrusted to the (Polish) Society of Christ Fathers, a community established in 1932 that has directed its service to Poles in the diaspora. In 1948, the Christ Fathers were succeeded by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a community originally established in 1816 in Aix en Provence. This French community decided in 1921 to establish a Polish Province, which consisted of Polish priests dedicated to caring for Polish

57 Mraczek, “Troska o migrantów.”

58 Szymański, *Duszpasterze Polonii*, 72–73; Rosowski, “Ksiądz Dr Tadeusz Kotowski.”

59 Rosowski, “Ksiądz Dr Tadeusz Kotowski,” 151–53.

60 Rosowski, “Ksiądz Dr Tadeusz Kotowski”; Rosowski, “Polska Misja Katolicka”; Szymański, “Początki Polskiej Misji Katolickiej w Belgii.”

61 Rosowski, “Polska Misja Katolicka,” 184.

immigrants. Both Polish communities had been trained to serve migrants and help them keep their faith. The first Oblate in Brussels was Fr. Karol Kubsz, who, like the first rectors, had experience ministering in Polish communities in France (during WWII).⁶² He became the PCM rector in 1948 and remained in that position until 1961. The Oblates continue to look after the Mission today.

In 2018 the Mission changed its name to the Polish Catholic Community, and its leader, Fr. Damian Kopytto OMI, became (instead of rector) a coordinator of Polish Pastoral Care in Belgium.⁶³

Until 1925, there was no Polish Catholic parish, mission, or any other type of religious center in Belgium. Several Polish communities were served occasionally by Polish priests who studied in Leuven. In the 1930s, the situation improved a little. There were four Polish priests and two Belgian Capuchin Fathers who had learned Polish, and Polish priests who studied in Leuven still helped on occasion. In 1974, there were 14 priests taking full care of the Poles and three more assisting them. There were also roughly 15 students from the Catholic University of Leuven available.⁶⁴ In 2023, two Polish priests (Oblates) resided in the Mission house at the Rue Jourdan, one at the St. Elisabeth in Schaerbeek and four Missionary Sisters of Christ the King for Polish Emigrants who helped them.

In Belgian society, where overall religiosity was and is diminishing⁶⁵ and the Roman Catholic Church has been struggling with declining membership,⁶⁶ the Polish Catholic Mission appears to have been a unique case of success. It has played and plays a crucial role in the local Polish group. There are currently four places in Brussels metropolis where services are held in Polish: Chapel of the Polish Catholic Community, St. Gilles; Sainte-Elisabeth, Schaerbeek; Notre Dame de la Chapelle, downtown; Saint-Joseph, Anderlecht. To this day, there is no Polish parish in Belgium, though Belgian parishes with large or significant numbers of Polish members try to provide Polish language services. The Polish Catholic Mission coordinates the pastoral care and orchestrates activities that are going on around churches. As already mentioned, Polish churches have always been centers of immigrant community life in the diaspora. Ethnic parishes were

62 Szymański, *Duszpasterze Polonii*, 80–81.

63 In order to avoid confusion, we use the earlier name, Polish Catholic Mission, in most of the text, especially since migrants also use it at the moment.

64 Dzwonkowski, “Polacy w Belgii,” 20–21.

65 Dobbelaere and Voye, “From Pillar to Postmodernity.”

66 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Belgium. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/> Accessed May 3, 2023.

entwined with a network of associations. In Belgium, the institutionalization of the pillar system of Church life has made it more than natural for the local Catholic Church to go far beyond pastoral care. In these two contexts, the PCM developed its agenda. From the very beginning in the 1920s, the role of Polish priests was never limited to pastoral ministry. Fr. Kotowski, the first PCM rector, initiated social meetings at the Mission which took place once a month.⁶⁷ He initiated the establishment of Polish Academic Youth Circles (*Koła Polskiej Młodzieży Akademickiej*) in localities where Polish students lived. In 1927, he opened at the PCM a kind of tourist branch to facilitate Polish student travel and enable Polish students to visit neighboring countries.⁶⁸

While many decades have passed in the meantime, the situation has remained very similar. In the 1970s, the Rector of the Polish Catholic Mission stated that Polish priests devoted only 25 percent of their time to religious services, while 75 percent was devoted to counseling, teaching, and organizing social life.⁶⁹ The same was said by a Polish priest in an interview that he gave in 1990s,⁷⁰ and a similar claim was made in the recent study conducted in 2021–23.

Polish priests became not only spiritual guides for their compatriots but also teachers, translators, and social workers. Indeed, the religious life of immigrants was woven into a network of ethnic associations and institutions: schools, choirs, societies, clubs, and media organs. Catholic societies included women's, men's, and youth units, and many of them published newsletters, calendars, and/or regular magazines.⁷¹ Together with the PMC, the role of coordinating Polish activities was initially played by the Committee of Cultural and Social Welfare for Polish Emigration in Belgium (*Komitet Opieki Kulturalno-Społecznej dla Wychodźstwa Polskiego w Belgii*). The Committee published a bulletin, which is now a valuable source of detailed information on activities held in local communities. It should be noted that the editor of the Bulletin was the rector of the PCM.⁷²

In 1923, the Catholic Men's Association was established (*Stowarzyszenie Mężów Katolickich*).⁷³ Another example of men's societies was the (Polish) Association of St. Barbara, launched in coalmining towns. In several places,

67 Rosowski, "Ksiądz Dr Tadeusz Kotowski," 159.

68 Ibid.

69 Dzwonkowski, "Polacy w Belgii," 21.

70 Kuźma and Brandeleer, "The Polish Community in Belgium."

71 Brakowiecki, "Czasopiśmiennictwo polonijne."

72 Rosowski, "Ksiądz Dr Tadeusz Kotowski," 160.

73 Kępa, *Ocalić od zapomnienia*, 384.

the local units gathered all Polish coalminers. They worked with mutual aid funds to help families cover the costs of accidents, health crises, and funerals.⁷⁴ Polish women's societies had a different range of interests. The Community of Living Rosary (Bractwo Żywego Różańca 1933), which brought together Polish women, was a prayer association, but its purpose was also to remind women of their patriotic mission in raising children. It emphasized the traditional role of the "Mother-Pole" and reinforced the gendered patterns of the family, in which men were breadwinners and women were bread-bakers. Baking bread is used here in its metaphoric sense, including the tasks of managing the daily life of a family, but also caring for the spiritual needs of the young generation.

In 1948, the Oblates founded a (Polish) Catholic Action in Belgium, a religious association modeled on the Catholic Action operating in Poland in the interwar period and banned during the communist period. At the same time, the (aforementioned) Catholic Men's Association was active, and the local units of the Living Rosary of Ladies fell under the control of an umbrella organization, the Association of Confraternities of the Living Rosary of Ladies. This consolidation was necessary because the number of local Rosary groups had gradually increased.⁷⁵ In addition, there was a Polish Catholic youth organization that dated back to 1947 (Workers Catholic Youth, Robotnicza Młodzież Katolicka) and later operated under the name Polish Catholic Youth Association (Katolickie Stowarzyszenie Młodzieży Polskiej). Polish (Girls' and Boys') Scout Teams, another type of immigrant youth association, were not directly affiliated with the Catholic Church, but scouts in their uniforms participated in Polish religious ceremonies.⁷⁶

Educational activities focused on religious instruction and Polish courses, language, history, geography, and literature. In 1952, the Polish Educational Society (Macierz Szkolna Wolnych Polaków) was established. This Society worked closely with the Polish Catholic Mission.⁷⁷ Currently, Polish language, history and geography lessons are held on Saturdays in buildings owned by the Polish Catholic Community. An important part of the program is the teaching of Catholic religion, now conducted by Polish nuns. After the political changes in 1989, Polish classes are supported by the Polish state. In a 2012–13 survey of

74 Szymański, "Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego," 35.

75 Kępa, *Ocalić od zapomnienia*, 45.

76 Kitowska 1992, Kołodziej 1999, Kukla and Miszczuk, *Harwerska działalność*.

77 Dzwonkowski, "Polacy w Belgii."

Polish women in Antwerp, half of the respondents reported that their children attended both Belgian schools and Polish supplementary schools.⁷⁸

In the 1980s, the PCM actively supported Solidarity, a trade union in Poland, independent of the communist state. In December 1981, when martial law was declared in Poland, Solidarity was suspended and later outlawed. At the time, Fr. Bolesław Kurzawa, rector of the PCM (1981–1984), collected funds for the families of imprisoned (in Poland) Solidarity activists, and he cooperated with the head of the Solidarity office in Brussels, Jan Kulakowski, and sent secret literature to Poland and provided care for Solidarity refugees who had managed to leave Poland. Thanks to this initiative, a few days after Martial Law was declared, Cardinal Goodfried Danneels celebrated a solemn mass for Poland in the Brussels Cathedral.⁷⁹ This part of the PCM's achievements has contributed to the emergence, in Poland and in the diaspora, of a legend of heroic national history and has become an important part of the collective memory of the Belgian Polish community.

Before and after the Solidarity period, the PCM organized Polish cultural events that focused on Polish heroic history. These events aimed to reinforce Polish national feelings by commemorating the Polish uprisings (1794, 1830–31, 1863–64, and the Warsaw Uprising in 1944) and the legacy of Solidarity (1980–81). Another reason for celebration was the anniversary of the May 3 Constitution of 1791, a failed attempt to reform the Polish monarchy. Polish priests were also involved in the ceremonies that were held annually at the Polish war cemetery in Lommel. An interesting detail relates to Fr. Bolesław Kurzawa, who studied philosophy in Leuven between 1951 and 1954 and served during this time as chaplain to Polish war veterans in Ghent. Fr. Kurzawa purchased a plot in Ressaix and initiated the establishment of the St. Maximilian Kolbe Church, named to commemorate a Polish priest who had saved the life of his fellow Auschwitz prisoner by offering himself for execution.⁸⁰ According to the records, Fr. Kurzawa managed to build a rectory, but there is no trace of the church today.

Polish pilgrimages to the Banneux shrine in Belgium and the shrine of Lourdes in France are an important element of Polish religious life which helps increase bonding social capital in the immigrant group. These events bring together Poles representing various local groups. Moreover, Poles meet

78 Baluk, "Integracja polskich rodzin w Belgii," 99.

79 Szymański, *Duszpasterze Polonii*, 86.

80 *Ibid.*, 85–87.

occasionally in the Millennium Center opened in 1961 in Comblain-la-Tour in Ardennes, a province of Liege, Wallonia. This holiday center for Polish youth still operates today, and it hosts summer camps for Polish youths from Belgium, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom. The Millennium Center thus has served as a bridge among Polish Catholic communities scattered around these countries. In the 1970s, some 400 Polish children spent part of their holidays there every year.⁸¹ Another place for trips and youth camps was Stella Maris, located in Pas de Calais, France, on the coast. Like the Millennium Center, Stella Maris brought together Polish migrants from several countries and served as a bridge among members of the Polish diaspora from France, Britain, and Benelux. In both cases, the centers were launched by the Polish Catholic Mission (in the case of Stella Maris, it was the Polish Catholic Mission in France), and over time, they opened to serve a wider range of guests. The Millennium Center is now managed by the Polish Educational Society, and it cooperates with the PCM.

Most records indicate that Polish migrants gathered around the church. In fact, the Polish Catholic Mission became a “miniature Poland” and a kind of “small homeland” where people sought assistance and guidance in difficult moments of life. As the sources suggest, a parallel was even drawn between the experiences of the Polish refugees and the plight of Christ: “it is not unusual for migrants to hear during Mass that they are the same refugees that Christ once was, that they are refugees from communism, the consequences of which they still have to deal with.”⁸² This message reinforces the narrative of the heroism, although the sermon was mainly aimed at labor immigrants. To those who felt humiliated or exploited, however, it may well have given some consolation.

At the moment, Poles in Brussels celebrate anniversaries of the reestablishment of the Polish state (November 11, 1918), with the central ceremony being a holy mass in Notre Dame de La Chappelle. During the Mass in 2019, the dedication of the banner of the 24th regiment of lancers of the Reconstruction Group of the First Armored Division “Antwerp” was held.⁸³ The event proves that reconstructions of heroic events have become an important part of Polish patriotic celebrations, and the PCM plays an important role in this.

81 Dzwonkowski, “Polacy w Belgii,” 20.

82 Leman, “Religions, Modulators in Pluri-Ethnic Cities”; Grzymala-Kazłowska, “Polscy nielegalni pracownicy,” 31.

83 “Obchody w Brukseli 101. rocznicy odzyskania przez Polskę niepodległości.”

The Polish Catholic Mission continues to serve as something of a substitute for the homeland for Polish emigrants, despite their integration into the host society. In addition, thanks to the size of the Polish émigré community and their attachment to religion and the significant participation in Sunday and holiday services, which is incomparably greater than that of the local community, arguably, the PCM activities have revitalized Brussels' deserted churches. With more and more services in Polish attended by hundreds of worshippers, the church of Notre-Dame de la Chapelle in the center of Brussels, the church of Sainte-Elisabeth in the Schaerbeek district, and, more recently, the church of Saint-Joseph in Anderlecht have regained their former character, are more readily visited, and parishioners help cover the costs of utilities and building maintenance through contributions and donations. Thanks to the Polish émigré community, some churches in Brussels have been saved from total neglect or even closure.

Polish migrants involved in religious activities confirm that the Polish Catholic Mission is important to them:⁸⁴ “The Mission is our home” (“Misja to nasz dom”); “I feel at home in the Mission” (“Na Misji czuję się jak w domu”); “The church is a substitute for the motherland (“Kościół to namiastka Ojczyzny”); “The church is Poland in miniature” (“Kościół to Polska w miniaturze”); “The Polish church is important to me for religious reasons; without it, life would be more difficult. Besides, it has a tradition here. It is a place to meet other Poles, although sometimes it turns into a big gossip forum.” (“Polski kościół jest dla mnie ważny ze względów religijnych, bez niego byłoby trudniej. Poza tym ma tu swoją tradycję. Jest miejscem do spotkania z innymi Polakami, chociaż czasami zamienia się w wielkie obgadywanie, jeden drugiego.”)⁸⁵

The Polish Catholic Mission did not shield immigrants from the host society, however. On the contrary, it helped create bridging social capital between them and the local population. It was anchored in the Belgian structures of the Roman Catholic Church, and despite some tensions in the first decades, it was fully endorsed by the local Church hierarchy.⁸⁶ Polish priests have cooperated with Belgian clergy in the local parishes, and Polish societies and choirs functioned alongside the parochial Belgian societies. Polish cultural events are attended, moreover, by members of the non-Polish community. Belgian bishops celebrated masses on Polish holidays, especially on the occasions of visits by Polish

84 Kuźma, “Emergence d’une communauté transnationale.”

85 Bałuk, “Integracja polskich rodzin w Belgii,” 91.

86 Szymański, “Początki Polskiej Misji Katolickiej w Belgii.”

bishops. As mentioned earlier, they also celebrate Polish patriotic masses in cooperation with the PCM. Polish students at the Catholic University in Leuven have belonged to the Belgian academic world and have been ready to help in the Polish Catholic Mission. Moreover, the Mission supported the (Polish) Workers Catholic Youth (1947), which was born out of inspiration coming from two sides: the French movement (*Économie et Humanisme*) and the Belgian JOC, or *Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique*. This is another example of the creation of bridging social capital, in this case in the transnational Catholic space.

Polish involvement in the Polish Catholic Mission has not diminished, despite the ongoing process of secularization, with Poland following trends initiated in the West. Today, the PCM is present in eleven places: Antwerp, Brussels, Charleroi, Ghent, Genk, Leopoldsburg, Liege, Maasmechelen, Mons (Tetre), Namur, and Ressaix.⁸⁷ Many migrants declare that they did not go to church in Poland, but as members of the diaspora, they remain in regular contact with the PCM. The community gives them a sense of belonging and security. This is especially the case of Polish Catholic women from Podlasie, who appreciate the social ties that function within the immigrant community. They do not question gender roles in the immigrant church, where women are denied both leadership positions and the right to assist in services. The relatively new rule allowing women in the Catholic Church to give Holy Communion and serve at the altar (“altar servers”) is not recognized in Poland, so Polish immigrants are not pursuing it.⁸⁸ It seems that labor migrants are more involved in the PCM than Poles who managed to integrate into the Belgian social structure and who found jobs appropriate to their skills. Indeed, many educated and accomplished women declare that they do not participate in the PCM activities.⁸⁹ On the other hand, church involvement depends on the migrants’ stage of life. Young couples want to have church weddings, baptize their children, and send them to Polish schools, at least until their first Holy Communion.⁹⁰ Most of them hold their weddings in their hometowns in Poland, but pre-marriage courses are organized by the PCM.

The religious life of Polish immigrants is becoming diverse, however. In 2000, the Polish Section of the European Catholic Center in Brussels was established, offering services at the Dominican Church (Avenue de la Renaissance). The

87 Leszczyńska et al., *Poza granicami*, 78.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 Grzymala-Kazłowska, “The Challenge of Transition.”

Polish Catholic Community Coordinator admits that the Section has little in common with the PCM/PCC (2023). As the group of Poles involved in EU structures increases (members of the European Parliament, employees in EU offices and their families), it seems that its role will grow. In addition, a Polish Orthodox Parish has been operating in Brussels since 2015. It was founded by immigrants from Podlasie who belonged to the Belarusian minority. Previously, all immigrants from Podlasie were seen as ethnic Poles, which is a typically ethnocentric/polonocentric approach. Research on the Belarusian minority in Belgium, its relations with other immigrants from Podlasie, and with immigrants/refugees from Belarus would be welcome.

The activities of the Polish Section of the European Catholic Center and the Polish Orthodox Parish contribute to the internal diversification of the Polish community in Belgium and may one day challenge the dominance of the PCM/PCC. On the other hand, their emergence demonstrates the importance of church attendance for many migrants: Catholic and Orthodox, PCM/PCC participants, and outsiders.

The PCM is conservative in every possible way. It preserves a heroic version of Polish history and conducts patriotic missions. It reinforces traditional Catholicism with its folk culture (for example the Corpus Christi processions). It provides religious instruction (led by Polish nuns) which is based on the teachings of Pope John Paul II. It reinforces traditional gender roles, with Polish women seen primarily as mothers. However, to this day, the PCM/PCC is an extremely thriving center of religious, cultural, educational, and social life which unites Poles living in the Kingdom of Belgium.

To sum up this brief overview of the Polish Catholic Mission/Community in Belgium, the initiative to establish the Polish Catholic Mission sprang from the conviction that faith and national identity are strongly connected. At the time, the Polish diaspora leaders tried to prevent the dispersal of immigrants in the host societies, and their countermeasure was to promote Polish cultural continuity and preserve their understanding of “Polishness.” In this case, cultural continuity meant preserving the Catholic tradition and the heroic narrative of the Polish past and present. The Church hierarchy, in turn, feared losing members or loosening ties with the Catholic Church.⁹¹ Both sides wanted the immigrants to stay within the immigrant community, which was to be organized around the

91 Szymański, “Początki Polskiej Misji Katolickiej w Belgii.”

religious institution. The migrant communities have proven an enduring entity and continue to function today.

To put the achievements of the PCMs in a broader perspective, it is worth returning to research on religion in the lives of immigrants. Most of this research has been conducted in the United States, and it has tended to highlight the positive role of religion in easing and facilitating the adaptation process. As Nancy Foner and Richard Alba have suggested, however, this is an oversimplification at best. In some instances, “[i]n contrast (...), religion is seen in Europe as the marker of a fundamental social divide. (...) The focus of scholarly commentaries on immigrant religion [in Europe] is almost exclusively on Islam.” Muslims in Europe, it has been noted, struggle to practice their religion and build up their institutions, and this has triggered conflicts (or been used as a pretext for conflicts) with long-established residents and institutions. Moreover, the incorporation of Muslims into European societies is viewed by some as very problematic.⁹² Looking from this perspective, the welcome enjoyed by Poles (who are EU citizens) in Belgium should be understood as something of a privilege in comparison with the response shown to Muslim immigrants. In other words, racism and Islamophobia create additional fault lines, alongside the fault lines of class, gender, and ethnicity. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, Poles were seen as mere a labor force and were not expected to integrate. Their Catholicism was perceived as an element that helped the host community exert a degree of control over them but did not bring them closer to the mainstream.

The Polish Catholic Mission at the Center of a Network of Migrant Associations and Institutions

Within the process of immigrant community building, Poles in Belgium supported Polish language ministry, raised funds to secure some form of Polish education, established and maintained publishing houses and libraries, published press materials, newsletters, and books, founded several societies,⁹³ and in the course of time managed to have their own ethnic services: shops, workshops, counseling, medical services, gastronomy, etc.⁹⁴ The list that gives names and data of many Polish immigrant institutions and societies in Belgium

92 Foner and Alba, “Immigrant Religion,” 360–61, 368–75.

93 Kępa, *Ocalić od zapomnienia*; Brakowiecki, “Czasopiśmiennictwo polonijne.”

94 Grzymala Kazłowska, “Polscy nielegalni pracownicy w Belgii.”

was compiled two decades ago and needs to be updated.⁹⁵ Here, we provide the most illustrious examples of Polish structures in Belgium. The process of their establishment can be conceptualized as an attempt to achieve ethnic institutional completeness.⁹⁶ However, nowhere was full “completeness” ever reached. In Belgium, there were no Polish parishes, and at the beginning, church services in Polish were irregular.

Still, in the network of Polish societies on a local level, the Church was very visible. According to detailed data provided by the rector of the PCM in 1936, after the rector’s visitation to the Polish community in Winterslag in Limburg, most of the local societies were connected to the church or directly supported by it (see the table below).⁹⁷ Among the network of societies were men’s, women’s, and youth organizations, a cultural unit (church choir), and a parents’ association. All were directly controlled by the PCM. The sport units (the Falcons, the Rifle Association, the scouts) and the women’s association seemed to be independent. But the scout teams, established by Polish consulates and formally not under the control of the PCM, were actively involved in Polish church celebrations animated by the PCM.⁹⁸ And the veteran society had a chaplain who cooperated with the PCM on a daily basis. In the case of the Eucharistic Crusade, it was initiated in the Polish local community by the Belgian Catholic Church and operated outside the influence of the PCM. However, it belonged to the network of Polish immigrant structures and contributed to its dynamic. Moreover, this case shows that the process of immigrant integration was advanced, and bridging social capital between the immigrant and the Belgian Church was generated.⁹⁹

95 Kępa, *Ocalić od zapomnienia*.

96 Breton, “Institutional Completeness of Ethnic Communities.”

97 Szymański, “Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego,” 64.

98 Kitowska, “Z działalności harcerstwa”; Kołodziej, “Harcerstwo polskie”; Kukła and Miszcuk, *Harcerska działalność*.

99 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

Table 1. Polish associations in Winterslag, (Belgian) Limburg, 1936.

Organization	Polish name	Supported by	Number of participants
Committee of Local Societies	Komitet Miejsowych Towarzystw		
St. Adalbert Mining Society	Towarzystwo Górnicze Św. Wojciecha	Church*	50
Polish Union	Związek Polaków	Neutral (no church affiliation)	70
Sport Society FALCONS	Towarzystwo Gimnastyczne "Sokół"	Indirect Westphalen pattern	40
Rifle Association	Związek Strzelecki	the Polish government	20–30
Church choir	Chór kościelny	Church	30
Confraternity of the Living Rosary (women's organization)	Bractwo Żywego Różańca	Church	115
Polish Women's Society	Towarzystwo Polek	Independent	120
Polish Parental Care	Polska Opieka Rodzicielska	Church	30
Union of Former Military	Związek Byłych Wojskowych		25
Scouting	Harcerstwo	the Polish government	50 + 50**
Eucharistic Crusade	Krucjata Eucharystyczna	Belgian Church organization***	20 + 20**

* Polish Catholic Mission, Roman Catholic Church

**Boys and girls

***La Croisade Eucharistique: <https://fsspx.org/en/the-eucharistic-crusade>

Source: Szymański, "Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego," 64.

Data similar to that for Winterslag was provided following visits by the PCM rector to Polish communities in Limburg's industrial cities: Waterschei, Zwartberg, Eysden, and Hensen.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, Polish newspapers were received regularly from France, and one should note the impressive Polish editorial and publishing achievements in Belgium.¹⁰¹

Another factor particular to the Polish diaspora in Belgium relates to the working-class movement, which (both Christian oriented and secular/ anticlerical) proved to be quite strong among Polish immigrants and led them to cross the ethnic boundary in their activity.¹⁰² On the other hand, it must be noted that there were Polish sections of the local trade unions, and the Polish

100 Szymański, "Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego," 65–68.

101 Klossowski, "Polskie firmy wydawnicze i księgarskie w Belgii"; Kępa, *Ocalić od zapomnienia*; Brakowiecki, "Czasopiśmiennictwo polonijne."

102 Goddeeris, *De Poolse migratie in België*.

Socialist Party (Polska Partia Socjalistyczna – PPS) was quite visible both before and after World War II.¹⁰³ This means that the Poles' participation in working-class activity was accepted in Belgium. Immigrants were welcome to launch their ethnic organizations within the broader structures, and they knew how to take advantage of these opportunities. Being active, whether in the structures of the Catholic Church or in the labor movement, Poles gradually integrated into the host society. Immigrants who joined the Belgian labor movement were simple workers, but there were some well-known figures among them. Edward Gierek worked as a teenager in the Arenberg coal mine in France, and around 1930, he joined the Polish Section of the French Communist Party, which caused him to be deported to Poland. In 1936, he arrived in Belgium, where he was employed as a coal miner in Limburg. He joined the local (Belgian) and Polish units of the labor movement. In this case, we again see a direct link between the Polish immigrant experience in France and Belgium and the advantages that knowledge of the language provided in the French-speaking regions of Belgium. After World War II, Gierek returned to Poland, and he eventually became a leading figure in the Polish United Workers Party, which gave him the highest position in the communist state (1970–1980).¹⁰⁴ His participation in the left-wing parts of the anti-Nazi movement during World War II was probably exaggerated, since the research was done under the communist regime.¹⁰⁵ Another key figure was Jan Kulakowski (1930–2011), a World War II refugee and graduate of the Catholic University of Leuven, who became a high-ranking official in international Christian trade unions and the International Labor Organization. Kulakowski is also an example of return migration. He settled in Poland after the fall of communism, reclaimed Polish citizenship, successfully led the process of Poland's accession to the EU, and was elected to serve as a member of the European Parliament in 2005.¹⁰⁶ As already noted, alongside these well-known figures were hundreds of anonymous Polish members of the labor movement who contributed significantly to the dynamics of the host society.

As shown above, Poles established a wide variety of associations and institutions in Belgium. In the late 1920s the leaders of the Polish group presented a typology of these structures: church societies, educational societies, mutual aid

103 Błażejczyk, Ludwik. Recorded interview, 2005. *Archiwum Historii Mówionej*. <https://www.1944.pl/archiwum-historii-mowionej/ludwik-blazejczyk,412.html>

104 Leszkowicz, "Edward Gierek: aparatczyk czy reformator?"

105 Panecki, *Polonia w belgijskim ruchu oporu*.

106 Niedźwiedzki, "The contribution of former exiles to the Polish integration in Europe."

societies, and sports societies. At the same time, Polish consuls distinguished three types of associations: social, cultural, and sport.¹⁰⁷ As for the labor movement, Polish leaders distinguished three branches: communist groups that were hostile to the Polish state at the time (Seraing near Liege); a radical group which questioned the role of the Church; and a Christian group which included Polish immigrants from Westphalia and the province of Poznan/Poznan. All typologies show that ethnic associations and institutions formed a very dense fabric within the immigrant communities.

After eight decades, a 2001 research report revealed information about *Little Poland* in Brussels. The list of the entities and activities in this community included Polish-language church services at two locations in the city, several associations, Polish language schools, choirs, small business (hairdressing, car repair shops, medical and legal services) and markets (South Market, Butchers' Market), discos, and gastronomy.¹⁰⁸ The religious activities (in Polish) were listed first in the report, which indicated the key role played by the Polish Catholic Mission.

However, it should be noted that formal membership in Polish societies in Belgium is rather low. This situation is similar to the situations in other centers of the Polish diaspora, and generally it indicates a decreasing level of social capital in the modern/postmodern world.¹⁰⁹ It is estimated that about 20 percent of immigrants are somehow involved in community life. This is probably an overestimate, since the typical level of Polish immigrants' involvement does not exceed 10 percent.¹¹⁰ It is estimated that in Antwerp 14 percent of Poles belong to an immigrant organization.¹¹¹ Still, migrants feel that they belong to an ethnic community. Many young Polish couples send their children to Polish schools, and they attend the events organized by the school communities. Many Polish children in Belgium attend Polish religious instruction, at least until the First Holy Communion. Whole families are eager to participate in the most important Polish holidays, such as Christmas Service and Easter ceremonies (blessing food on Good Saturday), but they avoid involvement in other activities. Moreover, ethnicity that is practiced or felt by the recent immigrants is often observed

107 Szymanski, "Życie organizacyjne wychodźstwa polskiego w Belgii," 42-43.

108 Grzymala-Kazłowska, "Polscy nielegalni pracownicy," 29.

109 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

110 Praszalowicz, *Polacy w Berlinie*.

111 Vancluysen et al., *Vanuit Pools perspectief*; Levrau et al., "Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004," 316.

among those who do not engage much in ethnic institutions.¹¹² Indeed, while Poles in Belgium have managed to produce high levels of bonding social capital,¹¹³ many still construct their identities outside the traditional structures of the diaspora.

Despite a certain level of social anomie, subsequent streams of Polish immigrants and geographical dispersion produced not just one but many local communities.¹¹⁴ These communities are comprised in part of people who belonged to various immigration streams, and they are diverse in terms of class and region of origin. Because the Polish Catholic Community operates in very traditional ways, which include reinforcing conservative gender roles,¹¹⁵ competing forces are gaining members, such as the Polish Section at the European Catholic Center and the Polish Orthodox Parish. However, these are religious institutions, and there is no secular body strong enough to take over the leadership of the Polish Catholic Community.

Living together and apart, over the course of the last half century, Poles in Belgium met for patriotic holidays and /or in the Millenium Center, and quite often they competed with one another. The main dividing line both before and after World War II was politics. Before the War, there was a division between groups that identified with the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand and groups that were involved in the working-class movement on the other. However, the strong position of Christian trade unions in Belgium has kept many labor activists in the Catholic Church. There was also a division between the groups that supported the Polish government after 1926 and groups that decided to remain neutral. After World War II, the division between pro-communist and anti-communist Poles was the most visible and rigid fault line. This division led to two separate celebrations in Lommel at the cemetery where Polish soldiers who died in World War II are buried.¹¹⁶ Admittedly, conflicts always attract attention and make headlines in the media. In other words, conflicts produce many records, which is why many researchers who examine organs of the Polish media emphasize disagreements within the Polish diaspora, both in Belgium and

112 Lesser, “Remaking Ethnic Studies,” 7.

113 Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

114 Goddeeris, *De Poolse migratie in België*, 10, 63, 68–69.

115 Leszczyńska et al., *Poza granicami*.

116 Venken, “The Communist ‘Polonia’ Society.”

elsewhere.¹¹⁷ Daily cooperation and harmony are undervalued because they take place quietly and leave little trace.

There is another interesting and disturbing aspect of diaspora studies. In traditional Polish historiography, the diaspora is characterized as a group that is an immanent part of the nation.¹¹⁸ From this perspective, researchers have focused on documenting the process of immigrant community building, highlighting the community's successes in promoting Polish culture, and they have paid a lot of attention to outstanding individuals (Polish immigrants) with whom average immigrants wanted to identify. This is true in part simply because these outstanding individuals produced a lot of records, such as memoirs, letters, interviews, and other publications. The main sources for Polish studies on the diaspora were the files of Polish institutions and associations abroad and personal records. These files highlighted all Polish patriotic efforts in Belgium and usually contained little or no information about how Poles had integrated into the host society and culture. Therefore, the researchers' perception of the diaspora reality was biased. Subtle indications of the integration process are often implicit, except for lamentations about members of the younger generation, which (according to these lamentations) preferred not to speak their native language (especially in public, but also with their siblings) and tried to avoid ethnic events.

The other side of the coin (the integration process) is usually overlooked by Polish researchers. However, studies on the integration of immigrants are being conducted by Belgian scholars and have yielded interesting findings. A new perspective was introduced by Idesbald Goddeeris, who noticed the interconnectedness of the political and economic causes of migration and has pushed for the de-heroization of the Polish experience in Belgium. Goddeeris later joined a group of researchers from Antwerp, and the whole group skillfully showed that Poles gradually integrated into their host society.¹¹⁹ Immigrants' integration was a slow and quiet process that has been going on in daily life, e.g. children at school, adults at work, and in regular contacts with neighbors representing the host society. Such a process is usually not documented, except on rare occasions, for example celebrations of Polish religious holidays in Belgian churches (as reported sometimes by local media). However, one can examine the process by taking into consideration several key indicators of integration. These

117 Praszalowicz, "Old Neighbors in the New World"; Kula, *Historia w terażniejszości, terażniejszość w historii*.

118 Kula, *Historia w terażniejszości, terażniejszość w historii*, 124–26.

119 Levrau et al., "Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004."

key indicators are markers and means (employment, housing, education), social connections (within an immigrant group, with the host society), factors that facilitate integration (language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability), and rights and citizenship.¹²⁰

On the Polish side, we have studies on immigrant integration by Aleksandra Grzymala-Kazłowska and Kamil Baluk. Their works are unique in the sense that both authors understand the significance of the integration process and use some indicators of integration. Grzymala-Kazłowska has analyzed Polish women's migration experiences in liminal time of their lives, and she has found connections between “doing family” and the integration process.¹²¹ Baluk also noted a connection between migrant family life and the integration process, and he demonstrated that members of the second generation of recent immigrants feel at home in Antwerp (where the study was conducted) and motivate their parents to stay in Belgium. The decision to stay (instead of to live as circular or short-term migrants), in turn, results in participation in language and vocational courses in Belgium, which leads immigrants to integrate into the host society.¹²²

Conclusion

The history of the Polish diaspora in Belgium began in the 1830s and continues to the present day. It included various migration streams and counter-streams: emigration from Poland to Belgium; return migrations from Belgium to Poland (especially after World War I and World War II); multiple migrations, such as the arrival of Poles from Germany and France to Belgium, and the emigration of Poles (mostly DPs) from Belgium to the USA, Canada, and Australia (1950–55);¹²³ and circular migrations in recent decades. At the moment, we witness each of these phenomena at the same time. Many Poles arrive in Belgium and settle there, while others move between Poland and Belgium on a regular basis. Migrants who seemed to be well established in Belgium decide to return to Poland, while seasonal migrants prolong their stay and change their status (in documented or undocumented ways) from temporary to permanent residents.

120 Ager and Strang, “Understanding Integration,” 170.

121 Grzymala-Kazłowska, “The Challenge of Transition”; Grzymala-Kazłowska, “Introduction: Rethinking integration.”

122 Levrau et al., “Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004”; Baluk, “Integracja polskich rodzin w Belgii.”

123 Dzwonkowski, “Polacy w Belgii,” 10.

After having spent several years in Belgium, many Poles decide to move on and they go to France or Quebec. Moreover, young people born in Polish families (or mixed families) in Belgium often decide to spend a longer time in Poland, and sometimes, they stay. At the same time, Polish students at the Belgian universities often marry Belgian classmates, and the couples move between Belgium and Poland. On the top of that, the number of Poles employed in EU institutions is increasing, and many of them live their everyday lives in Brussels. Almost all Poles representing these groups are or have been in touch with the Polish Catholic Mission/Community. There is a group of people who are connected with the PCM on a regular basis, but they are a minority among the local Polish diaspora. A larger group appears typically on Polish holidays and celebrates Polish traditions of Christmas carols and Christmas meetings (sharing wafers or *oplatek*), Easter traditions (*pisanki*), Corpus Christi processions, etc. Many Poles show up in the community when they engage in ceremonies involving rites de passage, which they want to celebrate in accordance with Polish traditions. These rites of passage include First Holy Communion, confirmation, weddings, and sometimes funerals. An even larger group has contacts with the PCM that have little to do with religious life but are related, rather, to teaching children the language or getting a job.

Nevertheless, studying the evolution of the PCM/PCC over the century, we found evidence that this institution, which had to struggle since its early years, managed to overcome the various difficulties it encountered. It has played a leadership role in the Polish community in Belgium and has contributed to the survival of this community to the present day.

In the age of online communication, it seemed that the traditional community was obsolete and would be replaced by online groups. The experience of the Polish immigrant group in Belgium shows that these expectations were premature. The diversity of Polish groups and the central role played by the Polish Catholic Community are indisputable. The immigrant church and school in their traditional form, with buildings, meetings, and celebrations in person, are still central in the lives of many immigrants.

The question that researchers have not asked so far is whether Poles moved within Belgium and/or the Benelux countries. It would be important to know whether Poles, if they changed their region of residence, moved between Polish communities or (what seems much more likely) whether they left their communities and settled in places where there was no ethnic infrastructure. One must consider that today it is possible to participate in many forms of ethnic

activity without residing in an ethnic neighborhood. However, as shown above, traditional forms of immigrant activity, with in-person meetings and a degree of religious decorum, have proven attractive.

The history of Poles in Belgium resembles the history of Poles in other destination countries and generally resembles the history of any diaspora center. In examining this history, we have focused on general trends that are common to all large diaspora centers (founded by immigrants from different countries), as well as on the characteristics of Polish immigration to Belgium. Each migration stream and each local immigrant community has its own unique set of experiences, but common patterns can always be identified.

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