

The Journey Over: An Oral History of Polish Immigration to America in the Early Twentieth Century

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The last decades of the nineteenth century and the first few decades of the twentieth century brought a new wave of immigrants to the United States. In the years before 1880, 85% of immigrants came from Western Europe, whereas after 1880, 80% of immigrants came from Slavic nations, such as Poland. What reasons brought these immigrants to America? What were their traveling conditions? What realities did they have to adjust to in America and how did they make these adjustments? Does the evidence support Oscar Handlin's theory that "immigrants lived in crisis because they were uprooted" while trying to adjust, or was John Bodnar's theory correct that these immigrants were transplanted and found adjusting easier? This article uses oral interviews with Mary Ann Choyce and oral histories from the Chicago Historical Society's Polonia Project Interviews to answer these questions.

On December 29, 2000, February 18, February 20, and March 12, 2001, I interviewed my grandmother, Mary Ann Choyce, whose maiden name was Marianna Budz and then transcribed the interviews. These interviews examine the events in the life of a young Polish girl migrating to New York and Chicago from Poland (nine years earlier released from Austrian rule) in 1929. Three main events structured the interviews: Mary's life in the farm village of Rogoznik, Poland; her journey to Ellis Island from Warsaw, Poland; and her transition from farm life in Rogoznik to city life in Chicago. The interviews examined the questions: What were the conditions in Poland or in Mary's family that resulted in their moving to the U.S.? Was the journey over difficult? What transitions did Mary have to make in her life, after her migration, in the city of Chicago, and how did she and her family react to these transitions?

Marianna Budz was born in 1920 to Katherine and Jacob Budz, in the farming village of Rogoznik, Poland. At this time, Poland had just received its independence, and the village of Rogoznik was no longer under Austrian rule. Four years later Jacob and his son John were shoveling peat moss on the family farm, which would later be cut into bricks to fuel the stove, when Jacob hit his big toe with the shovel. He became so enraged that he supposedly shouted, "things are so hard over here, I'm not staying in this crazy country. I'm going to my brother and borrowing money." He then went inside to tell Katherine, "I'm going ...to America. When I get enough of money I'll send for the rest [of you]." Certainly, a small accident on a farm was not the cause of Jacob's decision to leave for America. What was the actual cause? In order to answer this question one must analyze what had been occurring in Europe and the United States in the decades before 1923.

Before 1923, immigrants traveled in huge groups to America's major cities. Foreign-born individuals and their American-born children constituted a majority in America's big cities. Immigrants believed that America offered jobs and hopes that problem-ridden Poland did not offer. With nation-wide economic troubles, famines, and religious persecution back at home, immigrants fled to America with hopes of finding prosperity and acceptance.

The majority of these immigrants, 75% by 1900, were single young men who had previously been "peasants, farmers and villagers." One of these men was Jacob Budz, a Polish farmer who had just finished two years of compulsory army service. He left for Chicago, where he quickly got a job working for Swift and Company regulating the lard vats. As a devout Catholic, he frequently attended St. Joseph Church where he was to meet the woman he would marry, Katherine Scislowicz.

Katherine was about sixteen when she traveled to America alone. It was not until years later that her sisters would join her in America. In the early twentieth century, it was unusual for women to travel alone. If they did it was typically because they were reuniting with husbands or fathers who had left before them. Perhaps Katherine traveled alone because she was raised by less traditional parents, or was accompanied by someone from her village.

Soon after arriving in Pennsylvania in 1904, Katherine decided "she didn't like Pennsylvania." She moved to Chicago and lived with her brother Tom, and worked at Swift and Company in the Sliced Bacon Department. Tom introduced to Katherine to Jacob and, in 1908, they got married at St. Joseph Church.

They found a house close to the stockyards and had two children, John in 1909 and Anna in 1910. In the next four years, Katherine visited Poland twice so her parents could see their grandchildren and she could visit the life she missed. In 1914, "she talked ...[Mary's] father into going with her," and they returned to a Europe filled with turmoil.

They had arrived just as World War I broke out. Jacob, having spent two years in compulsory service, was drafted by the Austrian Army and for a period of 4 years and continued to fight for an additional two years for Poland's independence.

In the meantime, two more children were born, Andy in 1918 and Marianna in 1920. Jacob returned after the war to the farm, which Katherine had managed for the past eight years, and where they had their fifth child, Angela in 1924. "They were so broke" and "Poland was so hurt ...and there were so many sicknesses after six years of war in Europe" that Jacob felt he

had no other choice but to leave again for America. Six years later, the rest of the Budz family would join him.

Was the Budz's cause for leaving Poland, Poland's economic strife, typical of most Polish immigrants? It is true that many immigrants did leave because of the hardships caused by the war, such as poor living conditions. Aleksandra Lezaj left Poland due to bad conditions after the war and the inflation. She traveled to Ellis Island alone at the age of 22 and took a train to Chicago to meet her husband, who had traveled there earlier to avoid the World War I draft.

Catherine Kozik came to America with her family and to rejoin her father, who came over in 1902 because farming had become too hard. Her family was forced to leave Poland in 1912 because a flood came and ruined their crops, leaving them with no food. Similarly, Sister Mary Imelda Kryger came to this country years after her father had already arrived. She traveled with her mother and three sisters to Ellis Island in 1905.

Interestingly, none of these women traveled to America independently as Katherine did. Instead, they all left to rejoin their husbands or fathers in America. This fits the observation that most Polish woman did not travel alone to America, and certainly not as independents looking for work. In addition, it seems that some of these women left Poland due to poor post-war conditions. Others left due to poor pre-war conditions. Both Poland's economic strife after the war and poor farming conditions throughout the beginning of the twentieth century were common causes of emigration. Therefore, the Budz's cause for leaving Poland fit the norm.

John had been sent to America in 1927, and Anna was supposed to leave in 1928 but her passport and papers did not arrive in time. Therefore, Anna left with Katherine, Andrew, Mary, and Angela in 1929. They traveled by horse and buggy to Novy-Targ, and then took a train to Warsaw. At Warsaw a problem occurred. When they arrived at the station, Katherine asked at the desk for Anna's passport and papers, but they were not there.

Katherine became "real stubborn and went to the office and she said 'This girl was suppose to leave two years ago, and she still hasn't got her papers. Where are her papers...? I'm ready to leave with my family.... I'm not leaving until you find her papers.'" Moments later the papers were brought to Katherine. "They misfiled her papers." With the problem solved, the Budzs boarded the boat to America, carrying their suitcase and "a real big trunk full of feather ticks and pillows."

Anna was placed in second class because Jacob had paid for her second class ticket two years before. The rest of the family shared a room in third class because it was the cheapest. The family would often visit Anna in second class where she roomed with "two other girls [that were] going across." Her room was larger and "had no bunk beds." The rest of the Budzs slept in a third class room with "two bunk beds", one on each side of the room, and "a desk ...in the middle." The first class rooms had their own bathrooms, but the second and third class bathrooms were shared.

The trip lasted fourteen days and had its share of discomforts. Mary was sick for most of the trip. She was so sick that every morning her mother would place her "on deck in a chair and ...give ...[her] conuk in the tea to settle ...[her] stomach." "Angela was just a little bit sick, she ...got around, and Andrew was a wild man." Not used "to toilet paper ... and a mischievous twelve year old..., he used to pull [out the toilet paper] and run all over the ship [with it]." Though hard for modern day Americans to contemplate, Andrew had never seen toilet paper before and had never used a bathroom besides the outhouses on the farm in Poland. Therefore, even toilet paper was a delight to Andrew. The meals were also delightful, but Mary "didn't eat much." She was so sick in fact that her "mother thought ...[she] was going to die."

Once they exited the ship at Ellis Island, they entered an area filled with doctors. "You could not get into America if there was anything wrong with you ...[because] there were an awful lot of people with tuberculosis." Allowing these people to enter America would spread contagious disease. Her "sister Angela ...was allergic [sic] and so she always had red eyelids and little scabby eyes." The doctors would not let Angela out of Ellis Island without a thorough examination to make sure it was not a serious disease. "The doctors looked at ...[her] eyes and ...[her] mother thought they weren't going to let her in." They eventually allowed her to leave Ellis Island and the family boarded a train in New York heading for Chicago. Jacob met them in Chicago, and Mary saw her father for the first time in six years. Her only memory of him was from when she was three years old and he was leaving for Chicago. She remembered "it was a man with a mustache." He could have been any man in the station but when her mother pointed him out, they ran to greet him and Mary's life in the United States began.

Many immigrants had similar traveling experiences as the Budzs had on their journey to America. Alexandra Lezaj took the boat over to meet her husband in Chicago where he held a job and rented an apartment. Her one memorable thought while traveling was that America looked ugly through the train windows. Catherine Kozik felt that it was "rough on the boat." Everyone traveled on one large boat, where they slept on cots lined up alongside of one another. But, the bakery food was good, and she spent all her time talking with the other travelers. The trip lasted about two weeks and her ticket had been paid for ahead of time. Once the ship landed in Baltimore, she took a train to Chicago to live with her brother.

Similarly, Sister Mary Imelda Krygen was on the ship across the Atlantic for twenty days. Her mother was seasick. The food was delicious, especially the barrel of herring that was placed on deck for anyone to eat from anytime they wanted. Once at Ellis Island they were not allowed to leave for two weeks while doctors examined her sister, who had allergies. Once

they were allowed to leave, they took a train to Chicago to meet her father.

Although some immigrants had very similar experiences to the Budzs, other immigrants had very different experiences. For example, Anna Blazewicz traveled with her two sisters, her twenty-one year old brother and two men dodging the WWI draft. They were forced to go through five countries, hide in Rotterdam, crossed the Atlantic in record time, four days, and arrived in New York on September 4, 1912. Caroline Kalisz also traveled through a few countries. She went from Ropa, Poland to Gdansk to Liverpool to New York and then to Chicago.

The journey over appears to have been much more complicated than one would have expected. Many obstacles fell into these travelers' paths. The first hassle was getting the papers and the passports, which were sometimes misplaced. Once on the ship, the immigrants had to adapt to the stormy weather, seasickness, and living in close confines with other travelers. For example, both Mary and Sister Mary's mother were seasick.

Also, there were additional hardships for travelers not going directly to America. Unlike Mary's journey, Anna Blazewicz took large risks because of her choice of companions. They had to make fast getaways, hide out from authorities, take unusual routes, and land in Baltimore instead of New York, presumably because two of the men were dodging the draft. Also, Caroline Kalisz had to travel through many countries and unusual ways to get to a ship that would bring her to America. Clearly, there were many paths one could travel to get to America, and even more risks and challenges to overcome.

After the Budzs arrived in America, Jacob brought his family to their new apartment located at 47th and Palina Avenue. It was a "flat" consisting of three bedrooms, a living room and a kitchen. Jacob and Katherine slept in one room, "John had a bedroom and Anna ...slept on a cot in the living room." The rest of the children slept in cots in the kitchen. They lived above a tavern and Mary's first recollection was thinking, "Oh my God, we have to walk up all those stairs." The stairs were so high that Mary thought, "Oh my God we're going up to heaven." Having no basement or second floor in their house in Poland, even stairs were a new addition to Mary's world.

Many immigrants seem to have lived in flats, around the south side of Chicago. Alexandra Lezaj remembers her first two-room house. Anna Blazewicz lived in Bridgeport. Sister Mary Imelda Krygen lived in a two-flat in Melrose Park.

In these neighborhoods immigrant children found their place in local organizations and attended local schools. Mary and her siblings were immediately placed into Sacred Heart School. Mary was placed in second grade but because she quickly learned the English language, she was promoted to third grade after only six months. She was assisted after school by "a young teacher in second grade" who kept Mary after school and "would teach ...[her] to read and ...would translate everything" for Mary from Polish to English. Catherine Kozic, like Mary, attended Catholic school and was placed a year behind.

Mary was brought to school by a neighbor, a seventh grade girl, whose father owned the tavern below the Budz's apartment. As a native born American, she watched out for the children. During the cold winters she bundled them up, covering up their hands and faces to keep them warm, and led them to school everyday.

When they didn't have to study or do homework, Mary and her siblings "played jump rope..., played ball..., played jacks on the porch..., or sometimes in the evenings... [they would] play cards" with their father. Mary also joined Sokol, a Polish organization similar to modern-day girl scouts and went swimming in Davis Park. Catherine Kozic spent her free time in many organizations similar to Mary's, such as the Sokolnia Youth Club. Many Polish immigrants were Roman Catholic and involved themselves in church activities. Sister Mary Imelda Krygen joined many church organizations when she arrived here as a child.

There were also new social situations and experiences. Mary's first obstacle was to adapt to living with her father and brother again. Though Mary and her siblings loved their father, they did not know him well and so they usually "went to ... [their] mother, especially Andy." They were used to their mother because she had been their only parent for most of their lives. Yet, they adapted to having a father in their house by spending time with him in activities, such as playing cards.

Similar to Mary, Catherine had not seen her father in many years and did not recognize him when her mother pointed him out. She said, "So there was a man there, and he was supposed to be my father." Alexandra Blazewicz never forgot seeing African Americans for the first time.

One wonders if these Polish immigrants were uprooted, in a state of crisis, or transplanted, in a state of transition. The difference in terminology can best be described by plant behavior. A plant that is uprooted will likely die—it is in crisis—but a plant that is transplanted, struggles to adjust, but will likely survive. Oscar Handlin believed immigrants were uprooted or in a crisis state while trying to make the adjustment from being farmers in small communities in Europe to living in large overpopulated cities in the U.S. "Emigration took these people out of traditional, accustomed environments and replanted them in strange ground, among strangers, where strange manners prevailed." Handlin thought they never truly adjusted; instead, they tried to hold on to old customs while their families fell apart and all their customs were lost.

Bodnar, on the other hand, agreed that the adjustment was challenging but did not believe that these immigrants were in a crisis. He believed that prior Marxist and Progressive historical thought "paid insufficient attention to the struggle and

perceptions of individuals.” While Handlin’s research was based primarily on American historians’ observations of how immigrants reacted to their new environment, Bodnar based his research on the first-hand experience of immigrants. Bodnar suggested that by getting involved in the community, sticking together as a family and by having friends in America to help them, adjustment was easier and so they were really “transplanted.” The evidence from the interviews seems to suggest that they were, in fact, transplanted, rather than uprooted.

Though the move to America was hard on Mary, she does not describe the adjustment as a crisis, nor did her family fall apart. Mary, Catherine Kozic, and Sister Mary Imelda Krygen joined community activities to help with their adjustment.

In addition, Mary drew close to her family members. Mary spent her free time playing with her siblings or spending time with her parents. Her time with them helped the family stick together during their adjustment. Her “mother was there to take care of” her, and because of this she “never gave it [her adjustment] a thought.” Even Handlin admitted that the family “drew steadily together” after arriving in the U.S. Yet, he described this trend as a necessity to exist in their crisis state and not as a transition technique.

Bodnar’s suggestion that “kin and friends were free to assist each other in entering America by providing access to jobs, and homes,” applies to Mary and her parents. Neighbors and teachers helped Mary to adjust. Her seventh grade neighbor bundled Mary up with warm clothes in the winter and brought Mary and her siblings to school everyday. Mary’s second grade teacher spent extra time with her after school to help her learn English. As for Jacob, letters written by his relatives informed him of jobs in the Pennsylvania coalmines and Katherine was sponsored by her relative in the United States.

These methods for adjustment worked so well that Mary never thought to ask “when are we going back.” “America was right away ...[her] home.” She felt America “was a new experience” and her journey here “had to be done.” Clearly, she and most immigrants were transplanted in America and not uprooted from Poland.

Overall, immigrants came to America due to a variety of Poland’s poor pre- and post-war conditions. They came to America hoping for better lives. The journey over to America was difficult and immigrants had to overcome a variety of obstacles, such as seasickness, bad weather and living in very close confines with other passengers. After examining their experiences on the journey and their methods of adjustment, one can see that they still faced many challenges, but they were transplanted and managed to find a number of ways to make their transition easier.