

THE WILD, WILD PROMISED LAND OF UPPER SILESIANS: PANNA MARIA AND ITS CULTURAL HERITAGE*

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ABSTRACT

In the mid-19th century, a small number of families from the Upper Silesia region of Poland emigrated to Texas and established Panna Maria, which many historians have identified as the oldest enduring Polish settlement in the United States. The current study focuses on the cultural identity of these settlers and their descendants. It also discusses various aspects of the lasting cultural impact that the Panna Maria story has had on the two areas involved, Texas and Upper Silesia itself. The approach will draw on the theoretical frameworks of cultural and ethnic studies.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Identity, Ethnicity, Panna Maria, Silesia, Polish American

LA MUY SALVAJE TIERRA PROMETIDA DE LOS SILESIANOS:
PATRIMONIO CULTURAL DE PANNA MARIA

RESUMEN

A mediados del siglo XIX, un pequeño número de familias originarias de la región polaca de la Alta Silesia emigraron a Tejas y fundaron Panna Maria, que, para muchos expertos, es el asentamiento más duradero de la inmigración polaca en los Estados Unidos. Este artículo se centra en el estudio de la identidad cultural de estos emigrantes y de sus descendientes. Aquí, también se discuten algunos aspectos de lo que consideramos el largo impacto cultural que la historia de Panna Maria ha tenido en las dos regiones que experimentaron este movimiento migratorio, Tejas y la Alta Silesia. Mi perspectiva se fundamentará en el aparato teórico de los estudios culturales y étnicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Identidad cultural, Etnicidad, Panna Maria, Silesia, Polaco Americano.



The combination of Silesian/Polish and Texan/American culture led to a surprising degree of cultural and artistic creation. The foundations of this can be traced back to the mid-19th century, when a small number of families hailing from the Polish region of Upper Silesia received an invitation from Father Leopold Moczygamba to establish a new settlement in Texas. Motivated by the promise of a better life, these intrepid pioneers embarked on a grueling two-month journey, culminating in their arrival on December 24, 1854, at a barren and unwelcoming location that they would subsequently call Panna Maria. Beneath the shade of an oak tree, they gathered to celebrate Christmas Mass, an event often regarded as the foundational act of what many historians see as the oldest enduring Polish settlement in the United States.

As Charlton Ryan (1992) notes in his article “From Fact to Myth,” over the years there has been a transformation – or mythologizing – of this settlement, effectively turning the historical events themselves into a myth of origin. With this in mind, one of the aims of the present paper is to reflect on the cultural identity of the Silesian community in America, both the settlers themselves and their descendants, by examining some of the works that derive from the original historical event. In addition, I will discuss a variety of the cultural aspects of the Panna Maria story and the mutual influence that the settlement has had on the two areas involved: Texas/America and Upper Silesia/Poland. To this end, the theoretical frameworks of cultural and ethnic studies will be used. In particular, my interest lies in exploring the complexities of ethnic identity, including the challenges of negotiating dual or hyphenated identities in the context of Panna Maria.

Given the intricacies of these critical approaches, a brief theoretical overview will first be provided, including an exploration of the connection between cultural identity and ethnicity, this being especially useful in such a diverse place as the United States. According to Neil Campbell, “America is a place where different identities mix and collide, an assemblage, a multiplicity, constantly producing and reproducing new selves and transforming old ones and, therefore, cannot claim to possess a single, closed identity with a specific set of values” (2006, 22). As Campbell also notes, no scholarly work can speak for or fully explain all the cultural phenomena that have arisen in such a varied and multilayered context; on the contrary, a wide variety of different or even disjunctive stories constitute the *texture* of America, the *threads* of which may be “diverse, coherent, contrary and competing, crossing and separating, clashing and merging, weaving in and out of one another, forming and de-forming, gathering and fraying all at the same time” (Campbell 2006, 23). Hence, identity in America is a constantly shifting territory, and rather than being a single fixed idea of “Americanness” it is a plural concept that emerges through its very multiplicities, not by means of conformity and closure; a new and convincing definition of cultural identity in the United States, then, is “not based on any true Americanness, any ‘oneness’ of agreed values and history, but the recognition of difference” (2006, 36).

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By the same token, Stuart Hall's work on cultural identity underlines the fact that identities are not fixed or predetermined, but are constructed through a subtle interplay of cultural, social and historical factors. He argues that identity is not something inherent, but instead something that people actively create and negotiate, an approach that challenges essentialist notions of identity. In his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall explores the complex interplay of cultural identity and the experiences of diaspora communities, shedding light on how these processes shape individuals' sense of self and belonging in an increasingly globalized world; he claims that "[t]here are at least two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'; the first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self', hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (1990, 225). A second perspective on the concept of cultural identity by Hall recognizes that "as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are; or rather – since history has intervened – 'what we have become'" (1990, 225); he adds that "[c]ultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (1990, 225).

Looking specifically at the case of diaspora communities, it is notable that cultural identity and ethnicity often overlap, especially when individuals strongly identify with their ethnic group's cultural practices and traditions; as such, ethnicity plays a central role in shaping one's cultural identity. An interesting definition of ethnicity here is provided by John N. Bukowczyk in the article "Polish Americans, Ethnicity and Otherness." His article compares the notion of ethnicity to that of class, and cites English historian E.P. Thompson: "I do not see class as a 'structure,' nor even as a 'category,' but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships... class is a relationship, and not a thing" (qtd. in Bukowczyk 1998, 299). Nonetheless, Bukowczyk's principal claim here is that ethnicity is a more tangible entity than class, in that "it has connoted a set of values and attitudes; customs, practices, usages, and behaviors; identities, consciousness, and meaning which have had, in a sense, a life of their own and, as such, have been transmitted – 'handed down' – across generations" and – as he expresses somewhat poetically – it implies "immutable ties of race, of 'blood'" (1998, 299). Bukowczyk goes on to argue that the concept inevitably encompasses a set of relationships, indeed a broad range of these, which exist "between ethnic groups and the 'larger' (or dominant) society, between ethnic groups and their homeland societies and cultures, between and among persons who consider themselves members of the same ethnic group, and, finally, between ethnic group and ethnic group" (1998, 299).

Turning to the complex issue of identity in America, we might recall Richard Slotkin's observations on the relationship between ethnicity and nationality; in his article "Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality" he reiterates the definition of a nation-state proposed by Anthony D. Smith, Benedict Anderson, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Etienne Balibar, according to which it is a "type of community and culture distinct from earlier forms of social organization like the clan, the tribe, or the premodern commune" (2001, 470); that is, a nation



is an “imagined community” (Anderson qtd. in Slotkin 2001, 470) or a “fictive community” (Balibar and Wallerstein qtd. in Slotkin 2001, 470), one which is not itself based on “long-standing kinship, customary, and face-to-face relations” (Slotkin 2001, 470). Slotkin argues that, in the context of the formation of modern states, it is important to note that these have not typically been constituted by a singular, homogenous cultural group. Instead, modern states have frequently integrated disparate and sometimes even contrasting ethnicities, each possessing its own unique historical trajectory, and in some cases different languages. This phenomenon is underlined by Wallerstein and Balibar (qtd. in Slotkin 2001, 479), who propose that a systematic examination of the history of the modern world reveals a recurrent pattern in which statehood typically precedes the emergence of nationhood; such an observation challenges the prevalent (mis)conception that nationhood precedes statehood. It goes without saying that the concept of nationality as a construct based on fictive ethnicity finds particular relevance when applied to the culturally multifaceted case of the United States.

The story of the Silesian settlers – their difficult situation in the homeland, their particular attachment to tradition and the Catholic faith, and the cultural duality, triality or even quadrality of their descendants – makes them a particularly interesting case for analysis from the perspective of ethnic studies. In order to truly understand their story, some historical details about the *old country*, or rather, the multilingualistic and multicultural region that they considered to be their motherland, must be understood within the turmoil of Europe at that time.

As described by T. Lindsey Baker in *The Early History of Panna Maria* (1975), Poland, one of Europe’s oldest countries, underwent a significant change in A.D. 966 when King Mieszko I adopted Roman Catholicism, thus aligning Poland with Western influences. The country would go on to expand in both size and importance during the Middle Ages to become an influential European power in the Renaissance period. However, internal conflicts and a growing divide between the middle and lower classes and the land-owning nobility weakened Poland’s central government. By the late 18th century, the Polish king enjoyed limited power, and Parliament’s ability to function effectively was hampered by the ability of individual members to veto decisions and to dissolve the assembly with a single vote. Meanwhile, neighboring Prussia, Russia and Austria were strengthening as centralized powers. This situation led to the partitioning of Poland, with the first division occurring in 1773, followed by others in 1793 and 1795. Although a puppet state called “Poland” persisted within the Russian Empire, Poland as a separate entity ceased to exist, and its land and people were divided between Prussia, Russia and Austria.

Upper Silesia, where the founders of Panna Maria lived, while not part of these partitioned provinces, was significantly impacted by these partitions. It had changed hands from Poland to Bohemia in the early 14th century and was ruled by Hungarian kings and Habsburgs until Prussia’s Frederick the Great acquired the territory in 1742. Once Prussia seized control of the majority of the Silesian region, Prussian nobles subjected the native Poles there to serfdom. In addition, Prussian authorities actively encouraged the migration of settlers into the territory and



pursued a policy of Germanization across all aspects of life there. However, the Polish language, rural traditions and the Catholic faith all persisted among the peasantry.

Beginning in 1807, Prussian land reforms in Upper Silesia sought to end serfdom, but imposed costs on peasants, who were required to give up a significant portion of their land to nobles while incurring debts in the form of mortgages. The nobles were also released from their responsibilities to the former serfs, and now restricted their grazing rights, ultimately leaving them in a more challenging economic situation. Moreover, during the 1850s Upper Silesia experienced a significant rise in food prices, leading to increased poverty in the region. On top of that, massive flooding of the River Oder in the 1850s had a devastating impact on the peasants in the region, since the floods struck when the grain was ripe in the fields and potatoes were maturing in the ground, thus causing maximum damage to agriculture. The final straw came in the form of severe epidemics of typhus and cholera that plagued Upper Silesian peasants during the same period.

At this moment, Father Leopold Moczygemba, a Franciscan monk born and raised in the Silesian village of Płużnica and one of five priests working in the newly-created, sprawling diocese of Texas, wrote to members of his family encouraging them to join him in this new land of opportunity and prosperity in the United States. The news spread rapidly. As Baker notes, “[t]he tales about Texas were believed in every respect in that the more difficult circumstances had dulled the natural criticism of the peasants’ normally sharp reason” (1975, 10), and many peasants soon decided to depart for this *promised land* of freedom and abundance in search of a better life.

As historian Andrzej Brożek observes,

[...] the possibility [for the migration] became reality under the influence of factors which may be grouped loosely into three categories: first, objective factors – the absence of the material means of existence at home – which were only felt implicitly by the population; second, those objective factors – social, linguistic and political discrimination—which became a part of the people’s consciousness; third, subjective and even irrational motives (“summed up in the legend about the ‘land of promise’ across the Ocean” 29).” (1973, 21)

As for the voyage itself, the bare facts seem to be provided by Baker (1975, 12-15), who compiled and developed the historical studies of Brożek and Dworaczyk. According to these sources, in early 1854, soon-to-be emigrants from the Opole Regency in Silesia began preparations to leave for Texas, arranging with an agent from a sailing company to facilitate their journey from Silesia to Galveston. The first group of Silesians embarked on this journey in September 1854, traveling by train from the Opole Regency to the port of Bremen. From Bremen, they boarded the vessel “Weser,” arriving in Galveston on December 3, 1854 after a nine-week voyage, and thus finally reaching the New World. Upon their arrival in Galveston, the Silesians sought to contact Father Moczygemba, but he was not there to greet them, and as a consequence they were classified as “from Germany” in the official records. The colonists then followed the Gulf’s coastal plain to Indianola, either by



foot or in hired Mexican carts, which took approximately two weeks; from there they headed inland to San Antonio. After almost three weeks of overland travel, they arrived in San Antonio on December 21; Father Moczygemba met them there and guided them to their future settlement, located fifty-five miles southeast. Upon their arrival at this location – the small plateau situated between two streams known as San Antonio and Cibolo – on December 24, the colonists celebrated a Christmas Mass under a large oak tree, not only as a thanksgiving but also as an entreaty for strength in the face of adversity. They soon gave the settlement the name “Panna Maria,” meaning “Virgin Mary”. One theory about the name’s origin suggests that it was chosen to honor the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception following the corresponding Papal Bull, whereas others attribute the name to Father Moczygemba’s vision of a church in Kraków dedicated to St. Mary surrounded by a great light.

To conclude the historical part of the story of this Silesian migration, it is important to note that the initial wave of migrants was of just 60 families, a total of some 150 people. As Reverend Jacek Przygoda reported (1970, 80-81), three further groups of Silesian pioneers arrived soon after, including 16 families in 1855, 700 peasants later the same year, and about 30 families in 1856.

Bearing in mind the grueling Atlantic crossing, plus what must have seemed like an interminable journey on foot from Galveston to their destiny in Panna Maria – the inhospitable prairie with no refuge in sight – one can easily envisage the hardship involved. Some of the migrants perished at sea and others while walking inland, due either to exhaustion or poisonous bites – from creatures hitherto unknown to them – and they all suffered great hardships in their attempts to survive the early years. According to the factual data collected by the historians mentioned above, and also based on testimonies and autobiographical accounts collected by a number of scholars – Patrycja Nosiadek (2020) and Charlton Ryan (1992) among them – a complex image of these first Silesian settlers in America emerges, one which is particularly appealing to examine and compare with the story of Panna Maria as it has been disseminated as a part of the cultural inheritance of the migration over the ensuing generations.

Before turning to a number of works of fiction based on the narrative of the Silesian settlers in the Lone Star State, it will be instructive to discuss the cultural events that arose from Panna Maria’s unique history. In this way, a thought-provoking connection can be made between the factual data and the forging of the myth; the aforementioned article by Charlton Ryan (1992), “From Fact to Myth”, establishes a useful paradigm here in terms of the way in which this settlement story can be framed. Ryan draws our attention to the kind of changes that crept into the story over time. Having examined numerous historical sources, he deems particularly noteworthy those alterations introduced into the narrative after World War II. It will suffice to list just a few of these. According to the modified version of the story, instead of using ox-drawn covered wagons when travelling inland, the immigrants are said to have carried their belongings on their backs, walking barefoot. Meanwhile, the fact that they were mocked by local people during the journey due to the women’s short dresses and the men’s inadequate clothes disappears from the narrative. Also expunged from the history is the image of the Silesians digging holes



in the ground in search of refuge, struggling with wild creatures, disease, drought, cold and starvation, harassment from neighbors, cowboys and the Ku Klux Klan; instead, they are depicted fighting rattlesnakes and suffering religious persecution, such as the difficulties they encountered when building their church. On the other hand, the picture of them carrying a cross all the way from Poland is emphasized – indeed, the size of this religious artefact increases over time – and references to the oak tree also change, with the tree becoming “historic, memorable, famous, or venerable” (Ryan 1992, 36). As Ryan observes, such variations “only attest to the narrative’s acquiring mythic qualities” (1992, 35); he claims that, although the story of Polish immigrants arriving in Texas does not involve superhuman beings and supernatural events, it still qualifies as a myth of origin in light of the broader definition proposed by Roland Barthes (1957) – that a myth can serve as a communication system through which specific information is conveyed by means of speech or discourse for social purposes. Viewed through this broader lens, the Polish immigration story functions as a myth that narrates how American Poles can explain their presence in Panna Maria. The narrative hence serves the social purpose of affirming the self-identity of Polish Americans and reinforcing their traditions, essentially providing them with a heritage. In this way, the story goes beyond being a simple narrative and defines Polish Americans as a recognizable group.

The interpretation provided by Ryan, and especially his answer to the question of *why* the story changes, goes hand in hand with the adjustment/acculturation/assimilation paradigm which Thomas and Znaniecki have developed in their research (cf. Bukowczyk 1998, 300). Bukowczyk points out that from the work of Thomas and Znaniecki – and from the critical compilation by Irwin Sanders and Ewa Morawska – a broad line of interpretation can be drawn that “summarizes the immigrants’ relationship with the society around them: they describe a progressive succession of ethnic identities – from Poles in America, to American Poles, to Polish-Americans (with the hyphen), to Polish Americans (without the hyphen), and finally to Americans of Polish descent” (1998, 300).

Ryan (1992, 40), in reflecting on the reasons for these alterations, alludes to the celebrations which were held in Panna Maria to commemorate its founding. First, in 1929 there was a commemoration known as the Diamond Jubilee or the Grand Homecoming, the emphasis here being on Polishness/Silesianness and ties to the old country. The following decade, in 1936, a strong focus on Texanness appeared in Panna Maria’s Centennial Pioneer Reunion; Father Leopold Moczygemba’s sacrifices were highlighted, and indeed he was considered by the Texan authorities to be one of the Lone Star State’s heroes. In 1966, some time after World War II and during a widespread surge of national patriotism, a great celebration of Poland’s Christian Millennium and Anniversary of Nationhood took place, first in the White House, with three residents of Panna Maria representing American Polonia, and later that year in Panna Maria itself, with President Johnson himself attending the ceremony of placing a huge stone mosaic of the Black Madonna in the Church of Panna Maria. Ryan stresses the fact that



[...] the focus on Panna Maria's history had been readjusted again. Now American Poles were celebrating their heritage, just as Texas Poles had done in 1936 and as the first descendants had celebrated their Upper Silesian heritage in 1929. And the story of their origin that these American Poles had been telling had been changing to include the new emphasis upon their Americanism. These Polish Americans in attendance at the dedication of the Black Madonna mosaic had learned their American history in American schools, and perhaps for this reason the story of the Poles in America was taking on subtle parallels to the story of America's founding by her Pilgrim Fathers. (1992, 40)

Of note here is that this development of ethnic identity in Panna Maria, with many of its inhabitants recognizing themselves as Americans of Polish descent, did not cease or decline. On the contrary, it has flourished in the 21st century. The Polish Heritage Center Foundation was established in 2011 due to the efforts of Bishop Emeritus John W. Yanta, a descendant of the first Silesian settlers; The Polish Heritage Center was subsequently inaugurated in 2021, and provides an educational experience of the history of Poland, and of the Polish-Texas immigrants in particular. As Lauren Robinson puts it, “[t]he center is proud to be a site that honors Polish history and culture, while sharing with future generations the legacy and traditions left behind by the Polish immigrants to Texas” (2023, 68).

Today's Upper Silesians have also shown a very particular interest in those Americans of Polish descent, often seeing in them the heirs to the ancestors of the whole region. In 2014, marking the 160th anniversary of the first group's emigration to Texas, an exhibition entitled “Texan Poles Yesterday and Today” was organized by the Society of Friends of Sławięcice from Kędzierzyn-Koźle, Poland, in collaboration with the Diocesan Museum in Opole, and in cooperation with the Father Leopold Moczygemba Foundation from San Antonio, USA. The exhibition opened first in March 2014 at the Diocesan Museum in Opole, and since then has been shown in numerous cultural, educational and political centers, the Polish Senate included. Displayed on 21 panels, it seeks to shed light on the history of this emigration, the lives of subsequent generations of emigrants, and the achievements of their contemporary descendants. By using touchscreens, visitors can listen to recordings of interviews with the heirs of these first Silesian families. And the issue of the Polish-Silesian presence in the US population is by no means a marginal one; it is currently estimated that over 200,000 people in the United States are descendants of Silesian emigrants from the 19th century.

Similarly, a documentary produced by the Polish television station Katowice and directed by Dagmara Drzazga, *Panna Maria. Pionierzy i potomkowie (Panna Maria. Pioneers and Descendants)*, was released in 2005. Apart from reporting on the 150th anniversary of the Silesian emigration, Drzazga interviewed four descendants in their homesteads. 15 years later, in 2020, the film's director and cameraman returned to the same place to make a second part of the documentary, *Pokolenia (Generations)*. In this film, its creator attempts to meet with those who had previously been interviewed, and to explore questions relating to their identity, whether their Silesian roots are important to them, and if they still know the language of their



ancestors. He found that all these people continue to feel proud of their origins, cherishing the history of the town and of their own families. A small number do understand Polish, although they struggle to speak it; when they do, they can only do so using the Silesian dialect. Their spiritual guide in the recovery and/or solidification of the cultural identity is Father Franciszek Kurzaj, who himself comes from Silesia and has been the pastor of the Silesians in Texas for many years; Kurzaj is also the main character in the documentary. It is due to his efforts and enthusiasm that, in collaboration with his brother Gerard Kurzaj, the inhabitants of Panna Maria have had a chance to visit the land of their ancestors; so too have members of other Polish-descended communities and parishes in nearby Bandera, Cestohowa, Kosciusko, St. Hedwig, Falls City, Yorktown, San Antonio, Meyersville, Las Gallinas, White Deer, and McCook, these being daughter colonies of the original mother colony of Panna Maria. As many of those interviewed in the documentary state, they hold dear the emotional journeys they made to Silesian villages, the birthplaces of their ancestors, and what moves them in particular seems to have been the visits they made to the graveyards in these villages; they cannot help but feel moved and overwhelmed by finding so many familiar surnames, including their own, on the gravestones.

If we turn to cinematographic works that deal with the topic of the Silesians in America, key are the so-called Silesian Westerns, also known (in parallel to Spaghetti Westerns) as *Kietbasa Westerns*. These were made by Józef Kłyk, a self-taught Polish filmmaker from Pszczyna, Upper Silesia. Having developed a deep passion for cinema from young age, a particular fascination for American movies, chiefly Westerns, greatly influenced his work. Although Kłyk initially crafted his narratives using standard American Western storylines as inspiration, over time, and under the influence of texts by historian Andrzej Brożek, he began to make these immigrants the subjects of his films. The result was the Silesian trilogy *Szlakiem bezprawia* (*Through the Path of Lawlessness*), released in 1984, 1985 and 2006, played by amateurs from the director's own village (exclusively Silesian-speaking); the films explore the relationships between the settlers and their Texan neighbors. The main character in all three movies is Wawrzyn Złotko, a Silesian fugitive from Prussian rule; as Szymkowska-Bartyzel has pointed out, what is especially notable about him is that he is “a typical hero of American Westerns: very manly and brave, with life experience that allows him to build a very unambiguous code of values which he follows. He is uncompromising and knows that he can rely only on himself” (2014, 60). Oddly enough, he is also “a typical Silesian, for whom the community he comes from and its values (religiosity, solidarity and tradition) are very important” (2014, 60). Szymkowska-Bartyzel concludes by noting that

[t]he Silesians in Kłyk's Westerns represent the highest moral principles to which other social groups in Texas should aspire. In *The Free Man* [2006], the last part of the trilogy, Wawrzyn returns to his homeland because he misses his country and feels Texas would never become his home. Wawrzyn represents the mental dilemmas of many Silesian immigrants, their longings, pains, and nostalgia for their lost homeland. (2014, 60)



Of fundamental importance in any analysis of Panna Maria's history is the literary fiction that has drawn on the story, both in the USA and in Poland. With regard to the former, the novella *The Ghost of Panna Maria* was published in 1990 by a Texan, Rita Kerr. She worked as an elementary school teacher for 26 years, and on retiring began extensive research on the Lone Star State, the result of which was a body of work including 20 children's books and several adult novels. In the preface to *The Ghost*, Kerr states that "[t]he historical facts [...] are documented. The ghost stories are based on folk tales and are, perhaps, fiction" (1990, ix). Indeed, the book seems to reflect the hardship still suffered by the Polish settlers after a decade since the establishing of their new home in Texas. The first chapter opens with a bloodcurdling scene featuring a teenage boy, Jacob, fighting an enormous rattlesnake; in the following chapters, readers learn that danger awaits both children and adults at every turn, and that exhausting work is the daily reality for the whole community. Nonetheless, Jacob and his sister, Anna Maria – the story is narrated from their perspective – enjoy their life in Panna Maria, which centers around Polish traditions and the Catholic faith. Whereas the ghost-related elements in the book are no doubt intended to be scary for young readers, what is truly thought provoking and extremely sad is the unhappy ending to the story: not only does their mother die suddenly of a fever – probably yellow fever – but the dream of a better future for the 12-year-old girl is broken. Anna Maria's parents wanted her to finish her schooling, which we might well understand as one of the first meaningful changes in their immigrant existence, the first indication of success and progress; however, "Anna Maria's world was shattered [...]. She knew nothing would ever be the same again" (1990, 82), and it was now her duty to become the woman of the house and to follow the destiny of her female Silesian ancestors.

Interestingly, one of two historical novels published in Poland on the theme, Michael Sowa's *Tam, gdzie nie pada. Ballada o śląskim Teksasie* (*There, where it doesn't Rain. A Ballad about the Silesian Texas*), also emphasizes the female point of view, this time in a very progressive way. The novel, published in 2021, is written in Polish, but all the dialogues between migrants are in *modified* Silesian, as the author puts it, so it is easier to read by all Polish readers (there is also a brief Silesian-Polish dictionary included at the end of the book). The cast of characters includes some historical ones, such as the Moczygemba family and John Twoigh, a Texan landowner; however, the main protagonists, the Porada family and their oppressor, the anti-hero Arnold Szpyra, are fictional. The novel consists of three parts: "Homeland," "Voyage" and "Home." A particularly curious feature of the text – some might call it unrealistic – is that Marysia Porada is not at all depicted as an archetypal 19th-century Silesian woman. From the very outset, she reflects on her miserable station in life as a woman, forced by her family to emigrate:

Why does someone else always think that they have to make a decision for her? [...] Is it just because she is an ordinary peasant girl, a girl with no land, no property, no home of her own, whose only prospect in life is to marry, give birth to a dozen children and enjoy the happiness she encounters, if the lover does not turn out to be a drunkard or some other wretch? Płużnica, [...] America, [...] all the same



wherever in the world, the order has always been established by men for their own benefit. (2021, 159)¹

Oddly enough, Marysia turns out to be the only Silesian who understands the new world; she symbolizes the bridge between tradition, the rustic life view of her ethnic group, and American freedoms, the endless possibilities for all no matter one's social background or gender. Once in Texas she rejects a very likeable suitor, ignoring his objections that “[i]t's not normal, such things are not done. Since people have always been uniting into families, this is the order, this is how both you and I were taught at home” (2021, 280). In her response, she refers to the transition – only noticed by her at the time, it seems – between the two worlds: “Our values, traditions... I don't know if we will be able to cherish them, to live them, as it used to be at home. That's why I'm asking you, leave me, give me that freedom you told me about in Silesia” (2021, 280). Eventually, she is compelled to stand up to the entire community, defending all women's rights to take part in decision making, and to leave the Silesian ways behind: “It was like that in the old land, but does it have to be like that here, too? If it is to continue like that, that the man is always in charge in the house, and the woman has to obey him, than nothing has really changed for good” (2021, 324).

Nonetheless, and despite Marysia's singular example, the importance of tradition is conspicuous in the novel, especially in the case of Father Moczygemba's wide-ranging opinions, seen as stable and trustworthy, the very cornerstone of their identity:

Take Silesia. To who it currently belonged meant absolutely nothing. [...] The Slavs were already accustomed to constantly shifting boundaries [...] (2021, 199)
The question of national identity was alien to a Silesian. What mattered to a Silesian was land, family and tradition. Everything else would have to be subordinated to these three values, and one had no *raison d'être* without the other two. (2021, 200)

The other historical novel, largely faithful to factual events, is Zygmunt Skonieczny's *Ślązacy na Dzikim Zachodzie* (*Silesians in the Wild West*). Published in 2010, it tells the story of the immigrant Jan Moczygemba, one of the four siblings who went to Texas after being encouraged by their brother Leopold. As the author has indicated, the choice of Jan was due to his longevity, the colorful life he led, and his leadership abilities. In the novel, there are several chapters set in the 21st century; these depict a number of contemporary characters of Polish descent – plus Father Franciszek Kurzaj – who are seen researching their ancestor's histories and who themselves illustrate the successful careers that Polish descendants had enjoyed.

The text clearly focuses on the identity of its main characters, with the reader invited to observe their struggles with the new language, the inhospitable landscape,

¹ All quotations from SOWA, Michael. 2021. *Tam, gdzie nie pada. Ballada o śląskim Teksasie*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Lira. Translations my own.



their religious fervor and attachment to tradition, as well as their collective virtues and vices. As for their initial identity in Texas, the Polish priest and insurrectionist Antoni Rossadowski, Father Leopold's successor, noticed his parishioners' "unfamiliarity with the past and national culture and a poor comprehension of their region in connection to the fate of Poland after the partitions"² and the need to defend this "fragile Polishness" (2010, 127). To remedy the situation and at the same time help them understand their new country, Rossadowski resorted to storytelling; the priest's idea was to gather all the settlers together after Sunday Mass and describe for them both the current situation in Poland and the history of Texas. He wanted them feel an intrinsic part of this new Texan land, just like all the other races and ethnicities that had come from abroad and made the place their own through their own toil and sweat.

It would not be until the Civil War that some Silesian immigrants had the chance to truly assimilate with other Texans or indeed with Americans from other states. Yet at this point, with several of their young men dying on the battlefield, the community's perception was far from patriotic; they now asked themselves: "In the name of what? [...] In the name of this land that is difficult to clear and cultivate? Or perhaps of a country that continued to be a refuge for adventurers, a country which they did not have time to get to know better and claim as their own?" (2010, 166). However, by the time the War ended the Silesian soldiers had come to feel Texan, with a sense of belonging to the state and also with an increased distrust of the federal government. Thus, the veterans "returned with a huge baggage of experience to a still backward and hermetically sealed environment [...] Now they [...] were to bring a new spirit to the Polish settlements and push life towards faster changes" (2010, 175). At the same time, this was their opportunity to remind the American world about the tormented realities of their motherland; when preparing for the veterans' parade, another Polish priest and insurrectionist blessed them and reminded them of "our [other] heroes [...] without a homeland... It hurt and still hurts my heart to see the humiliated homeland, mine and yours, because one was once Poland. Maybe today at least you will show a little of this proud Poland" (2010, 208).

It is undeniably the case that over time the Silesians had embarked on a process of integration. A very prosaic symbol of this assimilation is that of their principal national vice: drinking. Thus, when Jan first explains the local ways to some later immigrants, he says: "Here Americans drink this brandy or whiskey. One is made from grapes, the other from barley. But both are expensive and our people don't like the taste" (2010, 100). The Silesians preferred their own moonshine, which they had always brewed from grain or potatoes and – they claimed – they would always favor. By the end of Jan's life, however, he chooses to drink whiskey, and when his friends rebuke him for preferring it over their peasant moonshine, he answers: "[I]n youth one would drink anything, in old age a person becomes more

² All quotations from SKONIECZNY, Zygmunt. 2010. *Ślązacy na Dzikim Zachodzie*. Szczecin: My Book. Translations my own.



picky” (2010, 305); we might add that “picky” here, while not openly stated, implies a specifically American choice.

Back in 1854 the Silesians set out from a place where they had long been discriminated against as an ethnic group; as Szymkowska-Bartyzel puts it, “[t]hroughout its history, Silesia has always been under someone’s reign, has belonged to other countries, and has never been autonomous. Silesians have often been under the repressive influence of foreigners who imposed their religion, language, and culture on them” (2014, 54). Thus, the issue of identity in the area of Upper Silesia had already been a complex and problematic one in the 19th century. In villages like Płużnica, the peasants felt *at home* when professing their Catholic faith, maintaining their traditions, speaking Silesian and making a living from farming their own land. Being a part of Poland seemed an important factor too, although probably not the crucial one. Most of these conditions could not have been satisfied under Prussian rule, and for this reason they left in search of a better future and as an expression of their particular quest for freedom.

Once on the other side of the Atlantic, the issue of cultural identity for the Silesians in Texas became not only more complicated but, more importantly, an evolving issue. Most of the settlers from the first generation would call themselves Silesians, although through the efforts of the priests – typically political refugees and supporters of Polish uprisings – the parishioners began over time to consider themselves Poles. Then the men were called up to fight in the Civil War; having fought alongside other Texan dwellers – some from very dissimilar racial or ethnic groups – these men returned to the community with a sense of pride in their state, that is, feeling themselves to be Silesian-Texans. Over time they passed this feeling on to their children who, having been born in Texas, knew little about Silesia and did not want to follow all their ancestors’ traditions (Jan’s adult son at one point comments on the issue of a dowry for his future Mexican wife: “Maybe in your place it was like this, and some place called Silesia, but not in Texas” (Skonieczny 2010, 271); because of that, and also because of this second generation’s schoolteachers, Polish nuns, they could now be defined as Polish Texans. The events that changed such a perception were the two World Wars; at these times they were simply Americans, dying for their *homeland* and fighting together against *the other*; they were now part of the nation, the *nationhood* clearly coming before *statehood*, to recall Slotkin’s terms (2001). Eventually, in the sense that cultural identity is a matter of *becoming* and “belongs to the future as much as to the past” (Hall 1990, 225), today’s inhabitants of Panna Maria describe themselves as Americans of Polish descent. Thanks to Father Frank (Franciszek Kurzaj) their Polishness has been rekindled and ties with the homeland of their ancestors have been re-established.

In addition, it is intriguing to observe that Father Leopold Moczygamba’s remains were exhumed in 1974 from a cemetery in Detroit – where he died, having escaped his disillusioned parishioners, who wanted to lynch him – and was buried under the famous oak tree. Hence, as well as being seen as a Texan hero, he was also acclaimed “Patriarch of Polish Immigrants”; some years later he would be called the “Patriarch of American Polonia”, and finally the “Father of Polish Immigration to the USA” (Ryan 1992, 43-44).



As the Silesian poet Jan Goczoł wrote:

“[...] to be a Silesian certainly does not result from the place of residence. Not even from the place of birth. Because these are external, physical facts. A Silesian, on the other hand [...] is a state of self-awareness. Historical self-awareness, cultural self-awareness, in some sense also - social and political. Self-awareness that does not yield to opportunistic or herd pressures.³ (qtd. in Cofałka 2009, 11-12)

The question of cultural identity, then, is not just a matter of *becoming* but is also one of *being*; it involves those “immutable ties of race, of ‘blood’” (Bukowczyk 1998, 299), that *thing* which embraces a broad range of relationships with one’s homeland society. As such, it is something that Father Frank – the modern *Patriarch of Americans of Silesian/Polish descent* – as well as cultural/literary production relating to the story of Panna Maria, have put into motion in recent decades, and which will continue for years to come.

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³ From COFAŁKA, Jan. 2009. *Księga Ślązaków*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar. My translation.

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