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Anne Fountain, *Peace College*

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by
Anne Fountain

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T. Ray Shurbutt, Editor
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PROMISES, PROMISES: POLISH IMMIGRATION TO BRAZIL, 1871-1939

By Anne Fountain*

(This study was initiated in an NEH Summer Seminar with Professor Charles Wagley at the University of Florida and was concluded at a Summer Research Laboratory on Russia and Eastern Europe at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.)

In the early twentieth century a legend circulated through Polish communities in the most remote reaches of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Russian Empire.[1] An undiscovered land, veiled in mists, called Paraná—in Brazil—had been rendered visible by the Divine Grace of the Virgin Mary and was now to be offered for settlement by long-suffering, landless Polish peasants.[2] While this picturesque legend may strike us today as a manifestation of the yearnings of illiterate and isolated folk, it emphasizes two essential characteristics of Polish immigration to Brazil: first, the intense desire of the Polish peasant for land—and, second, the often extreme exaggerations used by unscrupulous emigration-jobbers and honest but misguided politicians and writers who hoped for some sort of independent Polish state, even if on another continent. Poles, though they had a very strong national consciousness, had had no state since 1795.

Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century and extending to the outbreak of the Second World War, Brazil was to receive a stream of Polish immigrants seeking fabled "new lands" in South America.[3] While there is a considerable literature on this subject, the vast majority of the works available are, of course, in Polish and Portuguese with a considerable number in German and Spanish. Very few items are available in English, and most of these works assume a fairly extensive knowledge of Polish history in addition to Latin American history. While there exist many fine scholars of Latin American history and Polish history, very few of them cover both areas and far fewer write in English.

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*Anne Fountain, Peace College, Raleigh, N.C. 27604.

Thus, I perceive a need for this general English introduction to the topic for the Latin Americanist. I hope that in recounting the Polish experience of promise, adversity, and even peril in the frontier settlement of Paraná, their achievements may become more widely known and appreciated.

Why did Poles head to the different clime and remote promises of Brazil? This can best be seen against the backdrop of the unhappy course of Polish history in the nineteenth century. Toward the end of the eighteenth century the Poles had regained some of their former stature in European affairs; in 1772 the first of three partitions of their territory had contributed to startling them out of an intellectual lethargy. In 1791 they had promulgated a new constitution, quite advanced for its time, under the influence of both the successful revolution in the British-American colonies and the nascent revolution in France, the extent and excess of which were not yet in evidence. This constitution frightened the conservative, divine-right governments of the neighboring powers: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Two more partitions followed, in 1793 and 1795, and Poland disappeared from the map of Europe for 123 years.[4]

Poland placed its hopes in Napoleon and was partitioned yet again in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna. The central area was given over to the Russian Empire. National revolts broke out in 1830 and 1863, the first being crushed only after prolonged warfare between standing armies. The second never had a chance. Heavy-handed Russification and, in the areas under German control, Germanization, followed. In addition, a recession—almost a depression—reigned in the Russian Empire for the first half of the 1890's.

Only in Galicia, the Austrian area, were Poles allowed some autonomy; but there the economic life had stultified while the population began to grow geometrically. There were more hands than work available to busy them.

Thus did unhappiness and economic hardship combine to give a strong push for emigration; Brazil provided the promise and the pull.

Brazil promised land. While the United States offered opportunity, land there had been taken by earlier immigrants; the frontier had certainly passed by 1890. By some accounts it had passed, effectively, shortly after the Civil War.[5]

Very few peasants in Poland owned much land; the general pattern in rural areas was a vast mosaic of great latifundia not unlike the plantations of the Southern states of the United States. Only after 1863 were all the serfs in areas inhabited by Poles free to leave the land to which they had been bound.

Even those peasants with land were in difficulty; the pattern of inheritance dictated that all sons share alike, causing continual subdivision of already small areas. By the mid-nineteenth century most were

too small to support a family; migrations begain in all directions: to the cities, to Germany, overseas. The landless peasant was, obviously, even worse off, having to work for the manor. To these people the prospect of land was the prospect of hope; nothing documents so well this drive for emigration as letters written by emigrants and prospective emigrants:

> I want to leave my native country because we are six children and we have very little land, only about 6 morgs (about 7.5 acres or 3 hectares) and some small farm buildings, so that our whole farm is worth 1200 rubles at the highest. And my parents are still young; father is 48 and mother 42 years old. So it is difficult for us to live.[6]

And in one of the most frequently quoted lines about Polish emigration to the Americas, a 31-year-old farm worker wrote:

> I have heard that in Paraná it is possible to buy land at a low price. But what of it since I have no money at all? At the same time I heard that in North America there is suitable work. So I intend to go to North America, work there for two or three years, and only then marry, go to Paraná and buy a piece of land.[7]

Brazil had enticements sufficient to quicken immigrant interest. The government, first national (Imperial or Republican) and then state, often subsidized the costs of travel and settlement in Brazil, aware that the prospective immigrant could not bear these costs himself.[8]

While individual Poles arrived earlier, the general consensus marks 1871 as the initial year of Polish settlement in Brazil, and the man credited with generating the first wave of Polish immigration was Edmund Sebastiãn (Woś) Saporski, "Father of Polish Immigration to Brazil."[9] Saporski was born in Siołków (Siołkowice) in Upper Silesia, at that time a part of Prussia and the new-born German Empire. On the advice of his doctor, who recommended a warmer climate, he moved to Montevideo and after one year's residency to Brazil. There he became interested in the terms granted by the Brazilian Imperial Government to German settlers in the state of Santa Catarina and decided to seek similar arrangements for his compatriots.[10] In 1869 Saporski and Father Antonio Zieliński petitioned the Brazilian government for permission to bring in Polish immigrants. The lands set aside for Polish colonization lay between Palmeira and the Iguaçu River in the state of Paraná, and the first group of sixteen families apparently from Saporski's home town, arrived in 1871 after a journey of several months.[11]

Father Zieliński had been a part of the entourage of Archduke Maximilian of Mexico and with the fall of that enterprise had obtained a position in Paraná.[12]

The colonization effort got off to a less than perfect start, the first group of families being misrouted to Brusque in Santa Catarina along with the Germans with whom they were traveling. Only later were they able to reach Paraná, curiously enough **after** a second group which had left Upper Silesia had already arrived.

The major difficulties encountered in settling the Iguaçu Valley—Saporski's original choice—led, eventually, these two groups of families (some 164 persons in all) to the region of the capital of Paraná, Curitiba.[13] There, with Saporski's aid and a donation of land from the Câmara Municipal of Curitiba, was founded the colony of Pilarzinho, the first formal Polish colony in Brazil.[14]

Despite initial disappointment, Saporski's idea took hold and Polish immigration continued. In the next few years colonies were founded in Abranches in 1873 and Santa Cândida in 1875, both near Curitiba.[15] In fact, some twenty years after the 1871 failure of the original settlement in the Iguaçu Valley, a number of colonies were founded there and most of the settlers were Poles.[16]

While it is difficult to establish periods of Polish immigration to Brazil on which all students of the question can agree, three general categories can be discerned: 1871-1890, 1890-1914 (18), and 1918-1939. Immigration after 1939 was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II and the resulting utter devastation of Poland and by the closing of Polish borders by Poland's Soviet-dominated government in the years immediately following the end of the war.

The initial phase of trans-oceanic voyages can be said to last roughly from 1871 (or earlier) to 1888-89 or even 1890. In 1888-89 events combined to make the Brazilian option more attractive to Poles, and the earlier settlements had begun to develop some of the amenities of life which would appeal to larger number of immigrants, such as established Polish schools and parishes.[17] The 1888 abolition of slavery in Brazil helped dispel fears among the European peasants that they might somehow fall into a new servitude in the new world; they had in most instances sought by moving to Brazil to leave behind the social and economic servitude of their existence in Central Europe. The new Brazilian Republic also established a more open policy toward European immigration.

The period beginning in 1890 and continuing to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was known, then and now, in Polish history as the "Brazil Fever" or "Brazil Passion." Agents of navigation companies, paid by the Brazilian government to help attract immigrants to populate the vast unsettled territories of Brazil and to bring more advanced agricultural techniques to the idle lands of the interior, simply

exaggerated the benefits awaiting immigrants from across the ocean. These promises and the optimistic tone of at least some letters from earlier immigrants had a pronounced effect in Poland, building hopes sometimes of fantastic proportions in the minds of peasants in Galicia (the Austrian part of Poland) and in the northern villages of the "Congress Kingdom" (the Russian part of Poland).[18]

Some rumors had the Brazilian "Queen" bequeathing land to the peasants at her death.[19] Other rumors had the Pope supporting immigration to Brazil, the existence of great stores of precious gems, and such natural abundance that bread grew on trees.[20] The famous work of William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America,* although it discusses almost exclusively immigration to the United States, refers to the Brazilian wave as an "Exodus" and mentions two main periods: the early 1890's and the period 1910-13.[21]

The fact that such tales could thrive should not be taken as evidence that the Polish peasant was more credulous than peasants elsewhere. Rural isolation and absolute religious devotion are not the sole possession of the Polish peasant.[22]

Other Poles were neither so uneducated nor so isolated. Not a few of them were angered at the advantage taken of their less fortunate brethren. One in particular, Roman Dmowski, leader of the National Democratic Party, undertook to take at his own expense a trip to Paraná to see for himself whether the claims made were in any way justified. For several months in 1899-1900 he traveled and observed conditions in Brazil, not only in Paraná and not only of Poles. He found a mixed set of blessings, writing in 1900:

> If the Polish element has gathered together in a compact, if not particularly numerous, mass in Paraná, then that is to be attributed more to negative than to positive aspects of that land. Only because thick forests of hardwood exist here, difficult to fell; only because elemental powers, such as lack of rain, or birds and vermin, lower the farmer's yield and diminish the profit of his labor; only because the lack of navigable rivers, meandering roads, and incredibly high railway transportation costs here hinder the delivery of agriculture produce; only because this restricts normal trade and favors barter detrimental to the farmer, through which he suffers from a lack of money and cannot indulge himself any cultural activity; only because of these do the settlers of other nations flee this land and does our hard-working Polish peasant—inured in his motherland to misery, desirous of land, knowing how to make do with anything, not needing as yet any lamp by which to read a newspaper—sit here and console himself that he has it better than he would in Europe.[23]

One feels here acutely the anger and frustration which Dmowski surely felt keenly in the writing of these lines. He felt anger at Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Germany and shame for his own nation at the thought that the Polish peasant, not being able to read and write, was not greatly inconvenienced by the lack of a lamp.

The legends which helped to fan "Brazil Fever" are noteworthy in that they seem to have operated in regard to Brazil only and not for the much more numerous Polish immigration to the United States of America, the other principal New World destination for Poles. The Paraná connection has a unique status in the history of Polish emigration.

But true to the "boom or bust" cycle which seems so intrinsic to Brazil, the Paraná fever did not last. The realities of life in a sub-tropical region and the less sanguine letters of immigrants combined with such reportage as Dmowski's helped dispel much of the glorified vision—just as the Virgin Mary had lifted the mists from Paraná. With the breaking of the Paraná fever, a new era of Polish immigration began.

With the advent of World War I, Polish immigration to Brazil came to a halt. Many of those who would have left their native land could not; borders were closed all over Europe. Many others were drafted into the armies of the powers who shared Polish lands; Poles, especially of just those economic classes which were emigrating before the war, served in three different armies at the outbreak of the war and by the end of it were serving in at least eight. To the original German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian armies were added in the course of the war the English, French, United States, Polish Legionary, and Polish Blue armies. Many who might have emigrated were killed.

The inter-war period (1918-1939) was the third, and the last significant, period of immigration to Brazil. In many respects it resembled the period prior to 1914, but its social composition was slightly different. There were fewer landless peasants and holders of small plots, and more Poles headed to Argentina than to Brazil.[24] Most important, however, was the fact that Poles were now departing from an independent rather than a partitioned state. The establishment of Polish consulates also served to deepen ties between the mother country and Polonia-Brazil.[25] An additional interesting curiosum of the inter-war period concerns the period after 1936 when many of those classed as Poles, while indeed Poles by citizenship, were actually Jews by nationality, fleeing the gathering storm over Central Europe which eventually was to claim so many.[26]

Today Poles are active and successful in many areas of Brazilian life. Today they are still rather a rural group, with more than half of them still in farms and villages located, in the main, in a broad band extending south and west from Curitiba through Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande so Sul. Pope John Paul II's trip to Brazil in June of

1980 included a visit to the Polish community of Curitiba, fulfilling at least partially the Virgin Mary's promise that the Pole in Brazil might be specially blessed. Thus just as García Márquez anticipated a papal visit in the magical realism of fiction, so did Polish visions of hope and promise in the New World find unexpected realization in a papal blessing.

NOTES

[1] "Poland" is conceived for this time period to be those lands inhabited chiefly by Poles.

[2] Thomas, William I., and Znaniecki, Florian, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America,* 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1917), p. 147.

[3] Although approximately 180,000 Poles eventually emigrated to Brazil from Poland, this constituted only the fourth largest group of emigrants. The greatest number went to the United States (some 2,600,000); approximately 400,000 went permanently to the German Empire of Bismarck and Wilhelm II and as many more went to various parts of Germany as seasonal workers; approximately 400,000 went to various parts of the Russian Empire outside the area considered a part of Poland proper, often against their will—as exiles for political activity. See Izabella Klarner, *Emigracja z Królestwa Polskiego do Brazylii w latach 1890-1914* (Warsaw: Ksiazka i Wiedza, 1975), pp. 5-6. This little volume is a very handy summary of the questions concerning Polish emigration to Brazil. In addition, two other basic works in Polish are indispensable to gaining an appropriate knowledge of the situation: *Emigracja polska w Brazylii; 100 lat osadnictwa* (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydownicza, 1971), which is filled with material written in Brazil and other material excerpted from earlier works not readily available; and Krzysztof Groniowski, *Polska emigracja zarobkowa w Brazylii; 1871-1914* (Warsaw, *et al.:* Polska Akademia Nauk, Instytut Historii, 1972), which is the most extensive and easily the most academic treatment of the subject—also replete with a six-page English summary in rather small type.

[4] Several good histories of Poland are available in English. Among them are the *Cambridge History of Poland,* ed. by W.F. Reddaway, *et al.,* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941) and Davies, Norman, *God's Playground,* 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). On the narrower period, see Piotr Wandycz, *The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795-1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974) for an overseas view and Stefan Kieniewicz, *et al., History of Poland* (Warsaw: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1968) for an English-language, officially sponsored but quite creditable, Polish work. There are a number of studies in Polish on the Partition period (1795-1918), among them the appropriate volumes and chapters of the huge work *Historia Polski* published at various times over the last thirty years; Stefan Kieniewicz, *Historia Polski 1795-1918* (Warsaw: Polskie Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975); Henryk Wereszycki, *Historia polityczna Polski, 1864-1918,* 2nd ed. (Paris: Libella, 1979); and Marian Kukiel, *Dzieje Polski porozbiorowe,* 2nd ed. (London: B. Świderski, 1963). As can be seen from the locations of these last two works, emigré publishing still plays a large role in Polish culture.

[5] Kula, Marcin, "El Brasil y la Polonia de fines del Siglo XIX en las cartas de los campesinos emigrados," *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas,* XIII (1976), p. 43. Kula speaks of an eternal dream.

[6] Thomas and Znaniecki, p. 1507.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 1509.

[8] Price, Paul Hurvey, *The Polish Immigrant in Brazil: A Study of Immigration, Assimilation, and Acculturation.* Unpublished PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1951. pp. 37-38.

[9] Saito, Hiroshi, *Contenda: Assimilacão de Poloneses no Paraná* São Paulo: Editora 'Sociologia e Política,'' 1963), p. 9. Woś-Saporski wrote memoirs of this period: *Pamietnik* (Warsaw: Międzynarodowe Towarzystwo Osadnicze, 1939), excerpted in *Emigracja polska w Brazylii,* pp. 46-64.

[10] Price, pp. 302-3.

[11] Martins, Romario, *Quantos Somos e quem Somos* (Curitiba: Grafica Paranense, 1941), pp. 66-67.

[12] *Emigracja polska w Brazylii,* pp. 37-38.

[13] Martins, pp. 66-67.

[14] Martins, pp. 66-67.

[15] *Ibid.,* page 63.

[16] Price, p. 303.

[17] Groniowski, Krzysztof, "The Main Stages in the History of Polish Immigrants in South America," *Polish Western Affairs,* XVIII, 1-2 (1976), pp. 154-55.

[18] Kula, pp. 39-40.

[19] Burns, E. Bradford, *A History of Brazil,* 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 274. Some suggest that this may have been a possible confusion with the fact that the Princess-Regent, Isabel, signed the law abolishing slavery in 1888.

[20] Kula, pp. 38-40.

[21] Thomas and Znaniecki, pp. 1488-90.

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 147.

[23] Dmowski, Roman, "Z Parany, II," *Przegląd Wszechpolski,* VI, No. 3 (March, 1900), pp. 180-82. For Dmowski's journey to Paraná, see Fountain, Alvin M., II, *Roman Dmowski: Party, Tactics, Ideology—1895-1907* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 51-60.

[24] Rommel, Waldemar, "Poland and Latin America," *Studies on the Developing Countries,* VII (1975), p. 9.

[25] Kazimierz GXuchowski was the first Polish consul in Curitiba. In 1927 he published *Wśród pionierów na antypodach. Materialy do problemu osadnictwa polskiego w Brazylii* (Warsaw: Instytut Naukowy do Badań Emigracji i Kolonizacji, 1927). Excerpts appear in *Emigracja polska w Brazylii,* pp. 35-45.

[26] Saito, p. 10.