GROWING UP SLAVIC IN AMERICA

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Stepchild of America: Growing Up Polish

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I was born Polish-American thirty-two years ago in South Chicago.

Of the conditions and circumstances surrounding my birth, only its timing would be regarded by American society with indifference—let alone envy. Surely being born the son of a Polish-American steelworker is not coveted as an auspicious beginning in America. Nor is being raised in an ethnic, blue collar neighborhood viewed as an advantage in the national consciousness.

A significant part of my life has been spent coming to terms with the realization that I am a kind of stepchild of America. My roots are in Eastern not Western Europe. Therefore, I am regarded as an interloper; America is not my heritage. Yet, I am not an interloper; and I will not accept that role. I have paid my dues, and I belong. I have a past which I treasure and another land where I could belong. But America is my home, and I claim her along with all of the privileges and duties which follow.

South Chicago is a steel mill community at the mouth of the Calumet River where it empties into Lake Michigan. The community arose during the "Golden Age" of American industrial growth and the last great wave of unrestricted immigration from Eastern Europe, roughly 1870-1920. The location was ideal for the steel industry. Easy access to the ore ranges of northern Minnesota and the fuel resources of the lower midwest, a perfect link to all potential markets at the hub of the nation's railway systems, and the availability of unlimited and cheap immigrant labor promised great fortunes. The immigrants, most of whom were of rural origins, could find nothing better. Therefore, they accepted work as unskilled steel laborers and built their ramshackle neighborhoods in the shadow of the mills in order to be near their jobs.

Today, as in my youth, South Chicago displays the effects of its haphazard beginnings, lack of economic power, and neglect at the hands of both local and federal authorities. Most of the residential sections of the community, with their older frame bungalows and two-family structures, remain in reasonably good repair. The homes are well maintained, fronted by well trimmed lawns and sheltering, in the back yards, carefully nurtured gardens. These homes, like the numerous churches (largely Roman Catholic) which dot the area, are maintained only at considerable personal sacrifice and provide ample evidence of the keen sense of turf which is a major value of the residents. On the other hand, the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the steel mills and the commercial districts presently exhibit a deterioration and disregard previously unknown in the area. Major factors in this condition are an informal style of red-lining by the business community and the indifference of merchants and landlords who reside outside South Chicago.

The Chicago Skyway is a good example of the city's attitude toward the community. Built with little regard for the feelings of the local inhabitants, it whisks commuters and interstate travelers in and out of Chicago. Locally, however, it simply is another scar for the community which, along with the network of tracks and bridges, carves up the work places and neighborhoods. Thus, although the city has literally enabled others to "pass over" South Chicago, the local people have been ignored in the development of metropolitan transportation services.

On the human level, South Chicago faces the problems encountered by many blue collar communities. The dangers and strains of steel making, such as shift work and the brutalizing effects of twelve-hour days and six-day weeks (an overtime schedule readily accepted whenever possible by many workers in order to pad their paychecks), create a demand for release which results in alcoholism among many of the middle aged. In addition, shifting racial patterns outside the immediate community have recently created a sharp rise in serious crime locally, a new dilemma for the residents with which they have received little help or guidance.

Despite its shortcomings and bad press, South Chicago provided a fine environment in which to grow up. Even today it preserves values and strengths lost to much of our society. The mutual aid and ethnic solidarity necessarily forged in so many immigrant communities, for example, are still dominant features of South Chicago's culture. These values are fostered and maintained most especailly by strong nuclear and extended families, ethnic parishes and fraternal organizations, and the locals of national labor unions. All this is reflected in the leisure habits of the community. Residents spend most of their free time with relatives, while social

life outside the family centers around local churches, taverns, union halls, and ward political organizations.

Composed primarily of the early Slavic immigrant families, more recent Chicano arrivals, and a steadily growing number of Blacks, South Chicago has experienced a fair share of racial and ethnic tensions. Precisely on this point, for which it is frequently criticized, however, South Chicago provided me with a background far superior to most of my fellow Americans; for a number of factors have always helped keep the situation reasonably well under control.

The very weight of their day-to-day experiences has never allowed the Slavic community of South Chicago to lose sight of the humanity of Blacks and, hence, to deal with them exclusively in terms of stereotypes or myths. Every working day Blacks and Whites spend a minimum of eight hours sweating, cursing, and joking together in the mills. At the end of each shift they can be found drinking in the same millgate bars. And frequently they get together to see the Chicago White Sox (Bears, Cubs, or Bulls) discover a new way of astonishing the sports world. In addition, steel workers, perhaps because of the fatigue of their jobs, insist on living near where they work. The reluctance of the Slavic residents to flee their neighborhoods has mollified the fears of a radical and rapid racial change in the community and has consequently relaxed tensions. The deep respect of the white immigrants for their clergy has also helped tremendously; for, much to their credit, most of the religious of the ethnic parishes have continually preached the inherent dignity and rights of all human beings—at first, it must be admitted, rather abstractly but, as the influx of Chicanos and Blacks increased, more concretely and adamantly.

Another moderating force is the common plight shared by all residents of South Chicago. The major ethnic and racial groups of the community, all fugitives from the American melting pot, are drawn together in an endless struggle for respectability and power. A recent example of their cohesion is the case of Ed Sadlowski. In 1972 Sadlowski lost a close election for the presidency of District 31 of the United Steel Workers of America. His opponent in that race was Sam Evett, the handpicked candidate of I. W. Abel, national president of the union. Upon investigation, the U.S. Department of Labor brought the union to court with charges of voting irregularities. In the ensuing election Sadlowski—campaigning on a platform of returning control of the District to rank and file members, community development, and coalition—put together an impressive 2-1 margin of victory. Sadlowski's policies promise new life for the union locals and the community in general.

Finally, it must be noted that most of the friction which exists

between the racial and ethnic groups of South Chicago result from the rub of day-to-day living, a necessary side effect of any group of individuals in constant contact with each other. This must never be confused with the racial hatred which has sent so many others fleeing to white suburbs. When all is said and done, South Chicagoans of every background have a record of getting along which puts the nation to shame.

For me, however, probably the greatest advantage of being born and raised in South Chicago was that it made my early years of growing up Polish-American relatively easy. In very subtle ways, but ways which I have since realized were profound, South Chicago nurtured my identity; and although that identity has exposed me to moments of intense pain and bitter anger in American society, it has also provided the most rewarding aspects of my life.

The family was, of course, the source of my identity. The atmosphere of our home was ethnic. The foods we ate, the sounds we heard, the rituals we observed were heavily, but not exclusively, Polish. Perhaps the only ethnic crises I ever faced at home were my occasional rebellions at not getting enough "American" food like chili and pizza. These rebellions were sometimes tolerated, infrequently indulged, but most often squelched. It is ironic that today my children crave with amazing frequency the daily fare which I didn't always appreciate. The Polish meals which highlighted the year were the Christmas Eve dinner (Wigilia) consisting of traditional meatless dishes and the Easter morning breakfast which, after the gloom of Lent, gloriously reintroduced us to the tastes of ham, sausages, and baked goods.

The sounds emanating from our home were a potpourri of languages, music, and shouts. My parents spoke Polish, but the language most commonly used was English. Circumstances dictating the use of Polish ranged from the visits of relatives, an almost daily occurrence, to occasional attempts at concealing something from us children. Obviously, then, my parents did not teach us Polish; what we learned, which was not inconsiderable, was what we picked up from its frequent usage at home and in the neighborhood. Musically, our radio and phonograph were put to amazingly eclectic use. Depending on the time and day, the various strains of Bill Haley and the Comets, Marion Lush and the Polka All Stars, or a Chopin polanaise might be heard drifting from our window. Shouts, laughter and cries were also quite common. In usual Slavic style, we were a rather emotional and demonstrative family. Laughter and tears, anger and affection were freely given vent. Unlike most Anglo-Saxons we wept quickly, went quickly from weeping to laughter and back again; we were often

headstrong and hasty, sinning, repenting and then sinning and repenting again.

This picture of my home life would be incomplete without mentioning my father whose influence over me in all areas, including ethnicity, has been pervasive. My father was in my youth and remains today a man of tremendous power and crushing charm. A steel worker for forty years, he was part of an all Polish crew of loaders who shipped more steel in an eight-hour turn than any other crew in the history of his plant. Among the many affronts on my identity which I have since suffered, few arouse my rage as much as those which caricature my father and men like him. To his credit, and his disadvantage, his measure of success and worth has always been guaged on his care of his family. There have been times in his life when he should have looked to himself first; but he has steadily, to a fault, refused to do it.

Ethnically, my father was a perfect model. Aware of the numerous cases of discrimination against Polish-Americans both in the steel mills and in other areas of his experience, he, nevertheless, remained quietly but confidently proud of his Polish-American identity and certain of the American dream. There were, however, two things which inevitably provoked his powerful person to wrath and disdain: openly expressed contempt for his Polish identity and the cowardice of Poles who Ánglicized their last names. ("If it was good enough for my father, it's good enough for me," was the only justification he felt necessary to settle the matter.) My father's faith in America but equally firm pride of his Polish heritage have more than once been the major consolation in the many battles I have experienced since leaving his house.

A significant benefit of beginning my education at St. Mary Magdalene Grade School was that the attitudes of my teachers and the atmosphere of the school reinforced those of our home. I was, therefore, spared the trauma, not uncommon among ethnic children, of having the values and norms taught at home attacked in school. Here my identity was nurtured both by direct and subtle means.

Although our curriculum and the majority of our texts primarily reflected the Anglo-Saxon culture of America, time was also found to teach us a little about Polish history and to remind us of the numerous Poles and Polish-Americans who helped to make America great. The 1608 arrival of Polish craftsmen in Jamestown (twelve years before the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock), the contributions of Kosciuszko and Pulaski to the American victory in the Revolutionary War, and the fatalities of Polish-Americans during World War I were among the bits of information we learned which American education ignores or quickly passes over.

More informally, I was simply put at ease about my identity in a number of very subtle ways. My name, for example, was not a source of curiousity or ridicule (as it has become for my children). It was even pronounced correctly—something which would not happen again at an institution of higher education until I was being introduced years later at various Polish universities where I had been invited to lecture.

The final constituent part in the composition of my identity was our church. In the days of my youth, every canonical service in which the Catholic Church authorized the use of vernacular languages was available in our parish in both Polish and English. Most often, in fact, Polish was the preferred language. The sermons in four of the seven Sunday Masses offered at our church were in Polish. In addition, our liturgy catered to the feasts, rites, and hymns special to Polish Catholicism which attempts to touch the heart and appeal to the senses as well as satisfy the intellect. From the vantage point of today, it seems outrageous that so many American Catholics still regard this strain of their religion as backwards or ineffectual when the Church of Poland remains the most vibrant, vital and popular brand of Catholicism in the officially atheistic East or secular West—something which Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has commented on with admiration.

Like so many immigrant churches, our parish was also the center of social life outside the home. And here again the ethnic factor was always at play. Holy Name dances admitted modern tunes; but obereks, krakowiaks, and polkas were more commonly heard. And parish bazaars and carnivals featured the same Polish dishes against which I sometimes rebelled at home.

In short, although I, like all non-WASP children, was aware of a discrepancy between my life and the usual image of American life presented in the media, textbooks, and political speeches, the impact of this realization was greatly reduced for me. All the most important institutions in my life—family, school, and church—reinforced my identity and minimized the conflicts.

All of this changed, however, when I left South Chicago. It was then that the massive assault on my identity began.

Fortunately my initiation was rather gentle. It took place in high school at Quigley, the day school, prep seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago. It was here that I first encountered people, students and faculty, who saw in my Polish identity reason to hold me in contempt. Needless to say, this was a difficult thing to handle. I was, after all, as good as anyone. I had been taught this, and I confidently believed it. Why did others fail to recognize such an obvious truth? These attacks, however, were not too frequent;

and my adolescent mind soon came up with angry retorts which assuaged my damaged pride. Slightly more nebulous, and hence less easy to understand, was my sudden immersion in an Anglo-Irish brand of Catholicism which brooked no compromises.

After graduation from Quigley, I left the seminary system and worked a year to finance my education. It was then up to the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh. My selection of this particular college was quite deliberate. I knew a girl at Oshkosh—and could afford the tuition. For whatever reasons, perhaps the ethnic makeup of the state and the lower middle-class background of the majority of its students, Oshkosh generated only low key pressure on my identity. There were occasional jokes about my name and put downs about my background, but they didn't affect me too much—and my responses to such encounters were becoming automatic. I thought I had become immune. Nevertheless, it was always something of a relief to return to the steel mills of South Chicago during the summers.

In December of 1964 I married the girl who lured me to Wisconsin; and in January of 1966, one semester after my wife's graduation and one week before the birth of our first child, I received my bachelor's degree. During that spring my wife and I applied to a number of graduate schools. We were both offered and accepted NDEA fellowships to the University of Colorado. After a final five-month stint back in the steel mill, we three—Harriet, our young son and I—set off for Boulder.

Our years at the University of Colorado were beautiful. In addition to our graduate degrees, we picked up two more sons and dozens of close friendships. And in typical ethnic fashion, I cried the day we left the state to move to my first teaching position. It was also, however, during these years that the full fury of this nation's contempt for me broke loose.

The turmoil of the late sixties required a scapegoat, and it was the people of the South Chicagos of the nation who were singled out. Racism, the Vietnamese War, the population explosion, the decay of American cities, and the pollution were the faults of white ethnics. Invariably they were presented in the media or general conversations as unintelligent hardhats who spent most of their time drinking beer, waving the flag, and planning moves to the suburbs to escape black neighbors. Even when they were not being blamed for any social evils, these people were still pictured as ignorant dolts, devoid and probably incapable of any culture.

Initially my reaction was disbelief, but very quickly a deep strain of alienation set in which has never since completely left me. Every component of my identity was under attack. My Polish background pegged me as a member of one of the "historically

downtrodden, atavistic, and stagnant races" which Senator Henry Cabot Lodge and others like him opposed admitting into this country. My Catholic religion made my loyalty to America suspect to some and my liberal credentials invalid to others. And my blue collar origins indicated that I was a member of that class of whites who preserve their meager economic and social integrity at the expense of Blacks.

It must be granted that many of my associates were willing to except me from membership among the guilty and benighted. I was, after all, a refugee from the unfortunate circumstances of my birth; or such, at least, was the concession they were willing to make. This, however, only deepened my despair and fueled my rage. Nothing in my background prompted special guilt for America's dilemmas, or shame for my origins or identity. What was inferior about Polish culture? Why should the shortcomings of Catholicism be singled out for peculiar scrutiny? How could the powerless people of South Chicago be blamed for perpetrating such extensive social evils? The reports which I was receiving about my background simply didn't jive with my experiences; and I refused to renounce it.

In the midst of my anger and confusion, help came in a totally unexpected way. While still in graduate school, I was asked to help develop and to teach a course in Black-American literature—a gamble, I assume, based upon my sympathy for the Civil Rights Movement. My acceptance provided an invaluable opportunity to study and learn from the works of Black-American writers ranging from Booker T. Washington to LeRoi Jones. From this came my first meaningful insights into my own status and condition in America.

A recurring and important theme in Black literature is the significance of the past. Writer after writer insists upon the need for a sense of history if one is to properly appreciate the present. Although it now seems so obvious, it had never before dawned on me that an appreciation of history is as vital for Polish-Americans and other ethnics as it is for Blacks.

What were the Partitions of Poland? Where did your family come from? What have you ever done for America? Even with the advantages of my ghetto upbringing, strong sense of family pride, and university training, I was ill-prepared to answer such questions. Polish history was anathema. Many educators, even in South Chicago, feared it would retard assimilation; and others were convinced it contained nothing of value for Western Civilization. The thought of inquiring into the circumstances of my family's immigration never occurred to me, and no one ever volunteered the information. So strong were the prejudices generated by foreign

birth that one of my aunts denied her birth in Poland until the day she died. And virtually everything I was ever taught during my higher education about American history was designed to prove that the pilgrim forefathers and their children were responsible for the moral, political, and technological greatness of the nation. No mention was made of any serious contributions by Blacks, immigrants, or foreigners. Furthermore, the hostility of Anglo-Americans—epitomized by the Ku Klux Klan's multifaceted campaigns against "Koons, Kikes, and Katholics"—was conveniently forgotten; instead we were taught the inscription on the Statue of Liberty. Yet the answers to such questions contained the keys to my identity and status. If I was to understand them or expected others to understand, answers had to be found.

Black literature also helped me realize the function of stereotypes and racial-ethnic humor in American society. Blacks are heathen savages who, in Africa, dwelled in poverty and sin. Blacks are naive innocents incapable of caring for themselves. Blacks are vengeful demons menacing our homes and families. These stereotypes have been used during various periods of our history to justify slavery, disenfranchisement, and segregation. Poles are political subversives and enemies of democracy. Poles are racists. Poles are flag-waving patriots. As with stereotyping of Blacks, these images have been used to justify defamation of and discrimination against Poles. It doesn't matter that in both cases the images contradict themselves; the only prerequisite is that they demonstrate the legitimacy, indeed the moral rectitude, of our policies. In light of this, the viciousness of our preoccupation with racial and ethnic humor becomes clear. These jokes supply an endless stream of negative stereotypes about their subjects—stereotypes which by their moronic images deny the very humanity of their victims and allow the majority to feel superior to the minority. Stephen Fetchit and "the dumb Polack" are the same character whose identity depends on the choice of a victim.

In addition to such intellectualizations, the classroom provided a different type of comfort. Most of my students were Black; and in the evening section many were older —thirty years of age or more. The majority of White students were of lower middle-class origins. These men and women brought to our discussions of the literature in question a wealth of experiences rarely available in a university classroom. Both in class and in the rap sessions which frequently followed, the students, Black and White, revealed backgrounds and insights reminiscent of South Chicago. We didn't always agree; but we did deal with each other and the literature honestly and with mutual respect. The atmosphere was one which made me feel at home.

In the spring of 1971 I received my Ph.D., and in the fall we moved to Wisconsin where I began my first full-time teaching position. This return to the greenness of the Midwest was pleasant. Not least among the advantages of our residence in Wisconsin were the opportunities for regular visits to South Chicago which allowed our children to become better acquainted with their grandparents and other relatives.

It was also during these years, however, that our eldest son reached school age. For the first time my wife and I began to discover the pain of being ethnic parents. On the strength of his last name alone our son was frequently singled out by his classmates, with the occasional cruelty which arises in children, for ridicule. His confused state of intimidation on such occasions hurt beyond measure. It was one thing for us to experience the condescending attitudes of others but quite another to see our son ridiculed. Beyond carefully worded notes to teachers or parents, which generally met with feigned shock or simple indifference, we had no idea how to combat such situations or assure our son. Although I had read and taught his words over a half dozen times, only now did the impassioned plaint of James Baldwin strike home: "It was the Lord who knew of the impossibility every parent in that room faced: how to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised and how to create in the child—by what means?—a stronger antidote to this poison than one had found for oneself?" My despair was such that if I was ever tempted to surrender my identity, it was then.

After two years in Wisconsin we returned to Colorado and I accepted a position with the University of Colorado. The following spring I was provided with a unique opportunity to mature in my identity. Having won a grant to pursue research in England, I was also invited to deliver some lectures in Poland. This visit to Poland helped me complete my education and finally understand who I am.

As my connecting flight for Warsaw took off from Amsterdam, I was quite nervous. I was the first of my entire family to return to Poland. My mind teemed with expectations and fears, hopes and uncertainties. Trying to appear nonchalant, I paged through lecture notes but soon lost interest and began searching the faces of the other passengers. My impression from random observations and scraps of conversations was that the majority were Polish-Americans. What was bringing them back to this land of their origin? Sooner than expected, our plane circled to land at Warsaw's Okecie Airport, and we were asked to fasten our seat belts. To conceal the intensity of this moment, I put on my best Anglo-Saxon face. As soon as the plane touched down on Polish soil, however, my fellow

Polish-Americans spontaneously applauded and cheered. Immediately my Polish soul burst forth. I knew I was home.

I was not disappointed.

Polish history—so commonly ignored, misunderstood, or misrepresented in America—came alive. There was Gniezno ("nest"), legendary birthplace and first capital of the nation, where more than a thousand years ago (hundreds before most of the countries of Western Europe) the Polish state was formed. The monastery at Czestochowa which houses the picture of the "Black Madonna," the "Queen of Poland." This picture, which legend says was painted by St. Luke, is the spiritual heart of the nation and source of national strength. It was here in 1655, for example, that Polish forces rallied and turned back the Swedish invasion led by Charles Gustav X. Cracow in the Southern Highlands. This second capital is the home of the Jagellonian University, third oldest on the entire continent and the institution were Copernicus worked, and the Wawel Castle, one of the greatest architectural masterpieces of the European Renaissance. Then there was Warsaw, a city eighty per cent destroyed by the end of World War II but rebuilt with determination and once again the "Paris of the East." The home of Grotowski's drama, Penderecki's music, and Kolakowski's philosophy, this city is aesthetically and intellectually the equal of any in the world. This visit spurred my interest and pride in Polish history, and I am becoming better prepared to answer those previously unanswerable questions.

But the people, it was the people who made me feel at home. In them I found a greater sense of my own identity and a source of inspiration. They are a deeply religious people who express their faith with full churches, burning candles, and colorful processions but who also maintain the only Catholic university and daily Catholic newspaper anywhere in the Communist world. They are a fiery people, who throw reserve to the wind and ostentatiously display their emotions and affections. They are a family people whose homes are occupied by children and grandparents, and whose extended ties are manifested in large and lavish weddings, baptisms, and communion parties. They are also a determined and proud people who in their thousand year history have withstood over three hundred invasions of their homeland, political partitions, and repeated efforts at cultural genocide. In them I saw reflected the faces of my father and grandfather, and I was proud.

From the perspective of Poland I also had an epiphany about the second half of my hyphenated identity. For various historical and political reasons, Poles are extraordinarily fond

of Americans. This genuine affection for Americans further fanned my anger at the scorn with which so many Americans regard Poles, but it provided an unusual insight into my feelings for America. One night, prior to a lecture on Black American literature, I found myself with a couple who were among the small handful of Poles who criticized America. Their criticisms were accurate—racial discrimination, poverty, and the privileges of the elite. Not only did I stoutly defend America before these people; the next day I found myself, almost subconsciously, adjusting my lecture. It became important to me that my audience understand that many of America's shortcomings result from a political and social experiment more ambitious than any other in history. As I stood there, I also was grateful to America for giving me, the grandson of a Polish peasant, the opportunity to return to this land of my heritage to lecture at some of the most prominent universities of Europe. I am an American.

This visit to Poland, then, had helped me to mature as a Polish-American. It renewed my determination to force my fellow Americans to learn to understand me and my heritage. I will not allow America the comfort of her ignorance; that would be to cheat the country of its highest ideals and to surrender an identity which gives meaning to my own life.

The hardest part, however, lies ahead. Without the shelter of South Chicago, I must now help my children to grow up Polish-American. Everytime one of them is called a "Polack" or victimized as the butt of a Polish joke, the tightness returns to my chest. My children are worthy of the anguish and challenge and pride of being Polish and American; but I will not tolerate needless pain for them. The nation needs my children, but their loyalty will only be commanded through respect.