

ORAL TESTIMONY FOR THE BILL 261

**Presented by Robert Warzycha and Helena Rempala of the Polish American Club
February, 12th, 3:15 pm**

Robert Warzycha

Good Afternoon. Thank you for allowing us to present this brief testimony supporting the creation of the Commission and Office for Eastern-European Affairs. My name is Robert Warzycha and I am the President of the Polish American Club of Columbus and When we sent out a survey regarding this initiative in November of 2018 to our members, the responses stopped us a bit in our tracks. They made us reflect on the deep ties that Polish Americans have with Ohio. On behalf of our Club we asked our Vice –President Dr. Rempala to share those reflections with you.

Helena Rempala

Hello, my name is Helena Rempala. I am a clinical psychologist and a professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Health at the Ohio State University. As Mr. Warzycha told you, I am the vice-president of the Polish American Club of Columbus.

Our members basically said that the initiatives of Bill 261 are a godsend but that they seem to come with a bit of a delay, a delay of about 150 years...

You see, the integration of Polish immigrants into the American culture has been particularly difficult in the past. Historically, the emigration from Poland occurred later in the XIX th century than the first wave of other European Immigrants. We were the “later arrivals” seen as a threat to the job market, to the hard won prosperity, and to the emerging American cultural identity.

Our, Polish immigration, was forced largely by wars and political or economic hardships. Thus such immigration was done in haste, with no time to learn English and with no time to gather funds to invest in the New World. It often prevented people with education from continuing their professions.

At the same time, the historians suggest that in the case of America, Poles ALWAYS had a positive motivation to come. Here is a quote from one of the historians, Walszek: “People were not only pushed out of the old world by the

need to survive but also drawn by the wish for a social betterment” Walszek, 2002).

In Ohio, the first bigger wave of Polish emigrants faced an overt hostility. Those first Polish-Americans were originally settled by the steel factory owners to break the strikes of American workers (specifically the strike of 1882 at the Rolling Mill’s company). This type of immigration often resulted in isolation from the Americans, in homesickness, and in quick creation of own neighborhoods (Cleveland’s Warszawa, Krakow or Jackowo neighborhoods), establishments of own churches, own stores, own newspapers, etc. And so, in the absence of the Bill 261, the 1900s Polish-Americans Ohioans, albeit often uneducated and poor, right on arrival, actively worked on their own on integrating into the existing social structures. We see it as the biggest contributions of our Polish forefathers to Ohio – they did not “sit and wait”. They worked, studied, built, and ran for offices with many initiatives that are eerily similar to the ones stipulated in the Bill 261.

Let me list just a few most notable efforts of Polish-Americans’ that contributed to the State’s development: we would like to submit to the Committee a more extensive, although not exhaustive, list of last and current contributors.

Established in Ohio in early 1900 Polish Sport League promoted the American sports like baseball and basketball among the city’s Polish-American youth.

1916 saw the first Polish Medical and Dental Association (from its first meeting the Association accepted Russian and Slovak speaking physicians and dentist).

In 1916 Women’s Alliance funded the Association of Polish Women as a “fraternal benefit society”. They did it to keep their dues right here, in Ohio,” as close to home as possible”. They “wanted to devote all their attention to local matters.

The first Polish councilmember, Joseph Śledź, a saloon owner and Democrat from Ward 17, held the office twice from 1902-1907 and 1914-1917

The 1905 brought the first Polish Representative to the Ohio legislature, Mr. Józef Sawicki.

My own grand-great father Stanisław Dangel, co-founded and served as the first editor of the Cleveland’s Polish Daily news(that run from 1916-1966.

The 1920 Polish Educational Society organized English classes and lessons on history on politics.

This successful Ohio past smoothly runs into its present.

In Columbus we have the good fortune of benefitting from the research of the Astronomy Professor Krzysztof Stanek,

The Professor of Mathematics and Biostatistics of the Biomathematical Institute, Grzegorz Rempała, Professor of Pediatrics and the Battelle Center for Mathematical Medicine at The Research Institute at Nationwide Children's Hospital Andrzej Kłoczkowski.

Just last November Professor of Aerospace Engineering and Associate Dean for Research at OSU, Dorota Greiner-Brzezińska was offered by President Donald Trump an appointment to the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST).

The current President of the Polish American Club, former Europe's professional soccer player Robert Warzycha has its own unique contribution to Columbus, Ohio. He moved to the United States in 1996 and subsequently spent seven seasons in Major League Soccer with Columbus Crew. He later served as a coach for the team, serving as its Head Coach for five seasons."

So you may ask, if Polish-Americans figured out how to successfully assimilate into Ohio 150 years ago why would they still support and advocate for the Commission to be formed? Is it still needed?

While the origins of initial mistrust between American and Polish-Americans has long been forgotten, some sentiments lingered for a long time and linger to this day in some parts of the State. The sentiments resulted in an interesting trend seen not just in Ohio. By the second generation Polish-Americans assimilate quickly, efficiently, often losing the connections to their Polish heritage, Polish language, keeping just a few of the food items on their Holiday menus (pierogis, golabki, etc). By the third generation the Polish heritage in Polish-Americans is largely lost. While we could argue that it has been an adaptive trend in the 50s, 60s, 70s and even 80s to avoid discrimination now we know that it was and is detrimental to immigrants' mental health. It is also no longer desired in the XXI century Ohio. After all, vast majority of new arrivals from Poland come well

educated, often bi-lingual, and with talents, time, and resources to invest in Ohio.

Speaking as a psychologist and a university professor I would like to emphasize that studies repeatedly show that the best mental health outcomes for immigrants are associated with integration of their heritage into the American traditions, INSTEAD of “dissolving” their cultural distinctiveness into the famous “melting pot”. Integration instead of assimilation leads to lower levels of depression, anxiety, addictions, divorces crime. I believe that the Commission and the Office could promote a new, modern, more conscious and more deliberate, a healthier form of integration of the Polish heritage with the American one.

I would like to share with you few examples of initiative that would promote healthy integration of polish culture with the American one in Ohio. We have selected the examples that are particularly important to the members of the Polish American Club of Columbus. Again, we submit a more extensive list to the Committee in writing.

To validate and promote Polish-American culture among Ohioans:

- We would welcome that the Cities and State were truly invested in sponsoring International Festivals or other multicultural events where ethnic groups can show off their cultur. We would like to remind the Commission that all of the Columbus’s international festivals have been cancelled in 2019. Only small ethnic festivals remain but those require the effort of time, money and people power often unattainable for the individual ethnic organizations.***
- We would welcome a space accessible to various Eastern European ethnic clubs for their cultural events. Speaking from our experience, the majority of the yearly expenses incurred by the Polish American Club of Columbus goes toward rental fees. Lack of space interferes with scheduling cultural activities, hosting members of other ethnic groups, and running the Saturday Polish School.***

- ***We would welcome the State's strong and clear support of the OSU Department of Slavic and East European Languages and Cultures. It is no coincidence that the Department exists and continues to flourish in Columbus Ohio. We would welcome the help in establishing scholarships for Ohioans of Polish-docents to study the language of their forefathers.***
- ***We would welcome help in establishing a scholarship or an award for Ohioans to explore, uncover, and document Polish-American history in Ohio. Likewise, we would welcome the help in establishing a scholarship to send our brightest students to Poland for a semester of the cultural immersion experience.***
- ***We would welcome the State's help to select and host visiting scholars, artists, businessmen from Poland that would bear witness to the cultural and social changes in Poland.***
- ***We would welcome State-sponsored guidelines for the employers to respect Polish Catholic Holidays, such as Good Friday, Monday after Easter), the Marian celebration on August 15th or the most solemn of Polish Catholic holidays, All Souls' Day, on November 2nd to name the most important ones.***
- ***You may smile at our members' next suggestion but we included it in this testimony to demonstrate that even a small gesture will go a long way. We would welcome an Ohio vanity license plate celebrating Ohioan Polish-American heritage. It would be greeted by the Polish-Americans with joy and pride.***
- ***Finally, although the majority of newly arriving emigrants from Poland are educated and resourceful, it would be important to have a formalized way to help the new arrivals with quick access to Polish-English translators, lessons in English language, lessons in Ohio social and civic structures and access to information about the Polish-Ohioan cultural events.***

Any even the most joyful or the most carefully planned is a shock to the individual and his/her family. The better we integrate our new arrivals, the healthier, happier, stronger and more creative they will be! It will benefit us all as Ohioans and as Americans.