



The Polish Center of Learning & Discovery
at Elms College
291 Springfield Street
Chicopee, MA 01013



Keep Their Story Alive...

A Gesture of Gratitude to our Ancestors





The story of immigration is the story of America. The prosperity we enjoy today has been earned by the hard work and willingness to change of those who have come before. Our strength is our diversity, a mingling of traditions and talents from many cultures.

Polish Americans are one of the oldest, largest, and most successful immigrant groups in the United States. Their story is the story of America. Their history is our history.

May 3, 2005 was a very special day for the Polish Center. It was on this day we received the keys to the 18-room, 130-year-old building that would become our new home once it was renovated and converted into a Polish American museum and cultural center.

It is the mission of the Polish Center to tell our story—to compose a tangible image of the Polish people, an image made of historical materials preserved to inspire future generations while providing a research facility for scholars.

It is our intention to renovate this building as a gesture of gratitude to our ancestors for the history and the culture they fought so hard to pass on to us. Certainly our personal histories will be added to the Polish Center's collections in time, as we confirm our humanity by creating a culture distinctly our own, yet with echoes of the past.

Embrace your heritage





Help Us Answer the Question: Where Did I Come From?

Cultures are fluid, not static. Human beings are the most successful life form on the planet because of their keen intelligence and curiosity coupled with the ability to change and adapt to new conditions. But as we change and adapt, it's easy to forget where we have been, even in the space of our own lifetimes. How much more difficult, then, to understand the lives of our parents and grandparents, and their ancestors! Even an old letter, written in our own hand, often reveals a forgotten state of mind that takes us by surprise.

One of our members has saved a simple cloth patch marked with a "P." Discovered in an attic trunk or amidst a jumble of articles on a flea market table, this object would be utterly insignificant to most people. Countless such items, in fact, have been thrown away by bemused nieces, nephews, children, and grandchildren. That "P," in fact, is the badge that Polish prisoners were required to wear in Nazi concentration camps during World War II, preserved by a survivor who endured his captivity to be freed by American soldiers.

How many American children growing up today realize that the Holocaust targeted, not only Jews, but millions belonging to other religious, ethnic, and national groups? How much may be revealed by a simple object like that patch, when it is displayed in the proper context? How powerful is the lesson which may be learned from the evolution of a resilient group of brave pioneers, transitioning in a few decades from a near-medieval rural culture to the technological marvel which is the United States today?



"I think it's tremendously important that, as we become more and more comfortable with the notion that we are a global community, we must become equally aware of and celebrate our roots, our ancestry. As we move farther and farther away from our ethnic traditions, we have to have a place that will help us answer the question, where did I "come from?"

– Dr. Carla Oleska,
Director of Women's Fund of
Western Massachusetts





Join a Grassroots Movement

Copy: Since 1998, a group of dedicated individuals has been donating their talents, labor and finances to create a “living monument” safeguarding historical objects produced before 1950 representative of the material culture of the Polish people in America.

Once the idea for the Polish Center was conceived members worked tirelessly to collect clothing, books, domestic objects, and other historical memorabilia which, taken together, form a striking visual record of one of the greatest periods in human history. With the formation of a New England chapter of the Kosciuszko Foundation on the campus of the College of Our Lady of the Elms, a door was opened for further cooperation between the school and the Polish community. By 1999, the Polish Center was recognized by the Elms College Board of Trustees as an independent organization hosted by the school. A modest space was provided for storage and display of artifacts, and auditoriums made available for use by the Center.

Within a very few years, the phenomenal potential of the Polish Center had become apparent. Growth was so dynamic that enlarging the Center’s space was vital to properly accommodate the collections and to properly execute the mission. A number of scenarios for expansion, including construction of a new building, were considered before deciding on the present project. The 130-year-old former rectory of a church adjacent to Elms College—an historic, once-magnificent second Empire Victorian building being considered for demolition—was offered to the Polish Center. It is interesting to note that some of the first Poles to settle in Chicopee 126 years ago slept in this building on their first night in the city, and that John Fitzgerald Kennedy also spent a night there in 1947 during his first political campaign.

Board members pledged money to support the project, along with a number of banks. Several granting institutions whose mission, like ours, is to educate and inspire adults and especially children, also joined with us. Some of the labor and materials for the renovation have been provided free of charge by individuals dedicated to the Center’s mission. Organizations like the Kosciuszko Foundation, the Polish National Alliance, the Polish Genealogical Society, and the Society of Polish American Culture have aligned themselves with the Center in various ways. Many others have donated time, money, and precious memorabilia to help us make our vision a reality.



“The Chicopee Friends of the Library was a great grassroots group; they recently raised about \$2 million to renovate the library. This certainly is in the same category—a permanent memorial. Members have done a marvellous job collecting memorabilia and also saving a landmark structure. It is perhaps the most significant restoration project in the city. It ranks on a par with the saving of the Edward Bellamy mansion 15 years ago. I’m proud to join this grassroots movement.”

– Stephen R. Jendrysik,
Chairman of Chicopee
Historic Association



Keep Their Story Alive

Many Polish Americans recall moments in their lives when they connected with their parents and grandparents in a very special way. They may have related fascinating, even spellbinding, tales of their experiences in Poland and America or spoke of personal struggles that haunted them as they faced difficult social, political and economic crises. Still, they passed on age-old traditions lovingly and, perhaps, a language bound to a culture and land thousands of miles away. Looking back, we marvel at their inherent talents, perseverance, and accomplishments in America despite having little, if any, knowledge of the English language.



“The Center offers future generations an opportunity to get a feel for what parents/grandparents went through, why they came, their story, their contributions. It shows what they valued. If we don’t tell this story, it may be forgotten. It’s a way of keeping their story alive.”

–Ron Lech



Show Others Our Culture

The Polish Center houses a significant collection of historical artifacts, a library, and a genealogy center. It is a research facility that attracts national as well as international travelers, educators, and students seeking information about the history of the Polish people and their contributions to the arts, sciences and economy of our country. The new home of the Polish Center provides our community with a concert/lecture hall and a place for organizational meetings. The Polish Center is a major museum celebrating Polish American heritage.

The Center is located near the convergence of US Rts. 90, 91 and 391. This makes it especially convenient for visitors and scholars traveling between New York City, Albany or Boston. Within a thirty-mile radius of the center, there are no less than eleven institutions of higher learning, a number of museums and a rich variety of tourist attractions.

“The Center is a wonderful idea. We don’t have things like this... we have bars, we have places to have picnics—we need to show people our culture and what we do.”

– Waclaw Szymczakaewecz,
Vice-President of
Polish-American Congress



Educate our children

Children are insatiably curious. Children love to play. Their curiosity and playfulness are not, however, frivolous. They are the tools with which children build their understanding of the world and their place in society. Their restless minds and bodies need constant stimulus and enrichment. It's our duty as citizens of the world to provide the young with ideas and materials representative of our history and culture, to pass on our traditions and values so that they may one day assume our place in the world.

The Polish Center is a fascinating and engaging place, especially for children. The elevator will open onto a room reminiscent of the pier at Ellis Island, where so many American immigrants debarked. A dramatic mural depicts the Statue of Liberty and the New York harbor. Vintage steamer trunks, travel-worn leather valises, a shawl of rough wool, passports and other objects lovingly passed down give visitors the feeling of what it must have been like for this first generation of immigrants to arrive in a strange and sometimes frightening new place.

In one room, a magnificent reproduction of the armor of the 17th-century Polish hussar, complete with tall wings, faux leopard pelt, swords, scimitars, bow and arrows, and war hammers, amazes and delights. The Hussars were the elite division of the Polish cavalry, strong, brave, and gorgeously arrayed, who rarely lost a battle. In another room, a large Krakus dragon and a plentiful supply of costumes allow children to reenact their own battles.

Two upstairs rooms recreate a traditional Polish cottage, illustrating the conditions from which most Polish village immigrants came. In a third room, a real birch tree appears to grow from the floor to the ceiling. Suspended in the tree is a hand-carved kapliczka, or roadside shrine, common in rural areas of Poland. In yet another room, carefully preserved under glass, is the personal diary kept by a 15-year-old Polish boy, in which he records events during and immediately after his family's forcible deportation to Siberia in 1940.

The members of his family were among the over 1.5 million Poles exiled by the Soviets to Siberia, Kazakhstan and other remote and especially harsh regions of the Soviet Union. Still other rooms illustrate the everyday life of first-, second-, and third-generation Polish Americans and American Polish as their way of life evolved and changed during the decades after arriving in the United States.

Interactive, surprising, and visually stimulating, the Polish Center draws in the visitor, especially the young, weaving a tapestry of history from objects as diverse as a chalice and a cabbage shredder, a World's Fair souvenir and a vase carved from a single chunk of coal. Together these objects tell a story: one chapter in the story of our civilization.

"I'm 3rd generation Polish; my mom was brought up by her grandmother, who was an immigrant. Their house was on Mt. Tom in Holyoke, MA; it was taken by eminent domain when Route 91 was built. No trace of it is left. So much of that history is lost. My kids are 15, 13, and 8. They haven't had the opportunity to hear some of the stories I've heard. If one day they're curious, they could go to the Polish Center. It's a way of educating our children."

– Lynn Korza,
Grantwriter





Honor a Loved One

The greatest gesture of love and respect we can make towards a friend or family member who has gone on before us is to remember that person. Passing on the history and memory of those dear to us is a deeply felt impulse common to all cultures. Sometimes our feelings of love and loss are so great, it's hard to know what sort of tribute would constitute an adequate expression.

Sometimes, regrettably, we have not had them with us for long, or have not been fully acquainted with their histories. Many of them, out of consideration, have tried to spare us their disturbing memories. Many of them, out of modesty, have downplayed their triumphs. Sometimes our passions and avocations may differ. At certain points in our lives, we may attend little to the stories they try to pass on to us.

Their hard work and sacrifices may have been little recognized while they were alive. But their accomplishments should not be forgotten. By telling their histories, by memorializing their names, by displaying what they most valued, we may best honor them.



"Shortly after my wife, Dr. Krystyna Stroyzk-Zelechowska died, I read in the White Eagle about the restoration of a mid-19th century building which was to become the new home of the Polish Center of Discovery and Learning. To honor my late wife, Krystyna, I decided to make a monetary gift and I sponsored the Dr. Krystyna Stroyk-Zelechowska Polish Folk Art Room at the Polish Center. The Polish Center is a living monument to the Polish tradition and its history of which I am very proud. I have donated several beautiful items of Polish artifacts from Krystyna's collection, and I

believe that the Polish Center is a most suitable home where these items can be preserved and their historical and artistic significance shared with others."

– Antoni Zelechowski,
Retired civil engineer



Feel Proud to Be Polish

Anti-Polish rhetoric dates back to the 18th century, as a result of invasions of Poland by Prussia, Germany, and Imperial Russia. German academics contrasted high German Kultur with the "cultural inferiority" of Poland, portraying Poles as primitive, barbaric and lazy. American scholars trained in Europe brought back these distorted notions and spread them in the United States. The racist stereotypes were recycled by the German Reich during the Invasion of Poland, which precipitated World War II.

In contrast to these baseless prejudices, Poles and Polish Americans have proved to be hardworking, cultured, honest, and resilient. The first Poles came to this country in 1608, just one year after the British settlers in Jamestown. The British colonists were English noblemen or social outcasts fleeing England for religious freedom, equipped with neither military knowledge nor skilled labor experience. The Virginia Company therefore hired a group of Poles, landed gentry who had no inhibitions about doing the important manual labor needed to preserve the survival of the colony. These capable men promptly built a drinking well, several sawmills, and the country's first factory: a glass furnace. The goods produced in these factories became the first "Made in America" goods to be exported to England. In 1619, when the Jamestown Legislative Assembly denied them the vote, the Poles organized what became the first labor strike in American history. Their slogan was "No vote. No work." The Poles were soon victorious in what may have been America's first civil rights battle.

Poles can claim Copernicus and Madame Curie, Pulaski and Kosciuszko, Chopin and Pope John Paul II, among countless others. From Nobelist Czesław Miłosz to Stan Musial, from conductor Leopold Stokowski to Liberace, Polish Americans have left their mark on their homeland. As generations pass and diverse groups mingle in the great melting pot which is America, more and more people can claim Polish ancestry. National groups more recently arrived than the long-established American Polish community can learn from this phenomenally successful group. In America, everyone can feel proud to be Polish!



"It's important to preserve things for future generations. In my own house, we don't know what we have. So many things, we don't even know what they are. Like pictures. Who are all the people in the pictures? Our kids won't know any of this. Objects that have significance will end up in the flea market. My uncle was the first Polish-born mayor in the United States. I learned that from the Polish Center; I hadn't known about my uncle before the Executive Director told me! The Polish Center is amazing...a class act. It's a place to make you feel proud to be Polish."

– Adelle Love,
High school teacher



Become a Member of Our Family

We invite you to become a member of the Polish Center of Discovery and Learning. In addition, we would like to have your story as part of our collection. Your story can be recognized through a bequest in your will, by establishing a memorial to honor your family or friends or through a direct contribution to the Polish Center. The Polish Center is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit educational institution and all contributions are deductible for income tax purposes.



Ways to Help Keep the Story Alive

- Become a member of the Polish Center
- Make a bequest in your will or donate stocks, bonds or personal property
- Donate your historical objects
- Name the Polish Center as a beneficiary on life insurance policies
- Make a direct contribution
- Volunteer
- Establish a memorial fund to honor family or friends
- Attend our classes, concerts and events
- Remember our ancestors and keep their memory alive