“Milwaukee’s Citizens of Polish Descent are Worthy of the Priceless Privilege of American Citizenship:”

Milwaukee’s Polonia and the Pursuit of Americanization in the 20th Century

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The story of Milwaukee's Polish immigrant community's rise from humble beginnings in the late 19th century to inclusion into the wider dominant American culture by the mid-20th century is not a wholly unique one when compared to the stories of other European immigrant communities in America. Events and responses to them between 1920 and the 1940s played a critical role in these transformations, including for Milwaukee's Polish immigrant community. By the 1930s and 1940s, Milwaukee's Polonia was showing signs of growing confidence in its collective identity as American, including in how they interacted with other groups in Milwaukee's racial hierarchy, like the Jewish and Latino communities. Milwaukee's south side, which had once been home to a large majority of the city's Polish population, gradually transformed into a neighborhood with a Latino majority as Poles left for other areas west and to the south of the city, illustrating the opportunities that proximity to whiteness granted some immigrants over time when compared to the experiences of immigrants of color and of Black Americans who still fight for equality in the United States. The descendants of southern and eastern European immigrants are today considered part of the white, American majority, though many do identify with what we consider today their culture or ethnicity. Their interaction with that culture, however, takes a very different form from the agencies and organizations created for new immigrants or for minorities in the United States today.

Understanding American understandings of race and whiteness over time is essential to understanding the story of America's European immigrants from the outset. Historians Matthew Jacobson and David Roediger are both authors of influential books in the field of whiteness studies within American immigration history. Jacobson wrote the earlier of these two books: *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. It was published in 1998 by Harvard University Press. Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's*

Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs was first published in 2005, but it has since been updated as late as in 2018, though this book was not Roediger's first on these topics. These two works have more in common with one another than ways in which they differ. These books have similar theses, are trying to bring the history of race to the forefront of the historiography of American immigration, consider the early 20th century to be a pivotal point in this history, take long views of the history, and have similar takeaways for their audiences.

These books serve similar purposes and make similar arguments to one another. Both books are working to bring the history of race to prominence in our understanding of American immigration, specifically in the history of European immigration to the United States where people tend to think in ethnic terms rather than racial designations. The authors do this explicitly in conversation with one another. Jacobson writes that he wishes to "join scholars like David Roediger and Karen Brodkin Sacks in moving race to the foreground of historiography on European immigration and assimilation."[1] The authors make it clear that we must understand how people in the past understood the status and differences in new arrivals to the country rather than impose an anachronistic idea on the past that prevents us from more complete understanding. Jacobson writes in his introduction that

> American scholarship on immigration has generally conflated race and color, and so has transported a late-twentieth century understanding of 'difference' into a period whose inhabitants recognized biologically based 'races' rather than culturally based 'ethnicities.'[2]

He further cautions against making this mistake, writing "This blithe disbelief not only distorts the historical record but also carries with it some troubling baggage. Tacitly assuming that 'race'

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[1] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.
[2] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 6.

did not mean 'race'- that Hebrews, Celts, Mediterraneans, Iberics, or Teutons were really Caucasians- is worse than merely underestimating the ideological power of racialism; it is surrendering to that power."[3] Roediger's introduction also addresses these issues. He explains that differentiating between ethnicity and race today makes an important distinction between the historical treatment of European immigrants and the treatment of Black Americans and immigrants of color, but that it is still important to "honor the past usages" of race.[4] He goes on to praise some of the rare works in history that complicate race and American immigration, including by addressing Jacobson's book. Roediger writes that Jacobson's book

> is the existing study most like this one in its emphasis on taking seriously both the absence of ethnicity and the varied uses of race in the period of the new immigration Jacobson could scarcely be clearer in asserting that the oppression and exclusion suffered by people of color was of an entirely different order than what the European new immigrant experienced. His refusal to explain those differences by ahistorically invoking ethnicity allows him, also to the puzzlement of critics, to show how decisive the role of race was on both sides of the color line.[5]

Both authors are on the same page with their language. This project also tries to separate modern understandings of ethnicity from the racialized view that Milwaukeeans, and Americans, took of new immigrants arriving to their city.

Both historians primarily argue that the change over time in the status of new European immigrants was at the expense of non-Whites in the U.S. Part of this change involved giving up some of their particular culture in order to assimilate to the wider American culture. It did not take long for new European immigrants who arrived in the U.S. to understand that Black Americans were considered inferior, and part of their assimilation, as both Roediger and Jacobson argue, was to adopt racist practices. Jacobson writes that "Racism now appears not

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[3] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 6.
[4] David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (Basic Books, 2018), 31.
[5] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 31-32.

anomalous to the working of American democracy, but fundamental to it."[6] Roediger's fourth chapter focuses closely on the ways that new immigrants absorbed American racism. One strong example Roediger includes appears on page 125 where he describes the white supremacist images that some immigrants learned to use in the entertainment spheres. He writes "Blackface minstrel shows occurred in churches serving immigrants, in voluntary immigrant organizations, and in settlement houses."[7]

Both historians point to the early 20th century as the major period of perceived racial change and this period of time factors into both books in a major way. Jacobson writes that "The period from the 1920s to the 1960s saw a dramatic decline in the perceived differences among these white Others. Immigration restriction, along with internal black migrations, altered the nation's racial alchemy and redrew the dominant racial configuration along the strict, binary line of white and black, creating Caucasians where before had been so many Celts, Hebrews, Teutons, Mediterraneans, and Slavs."[8] Roediger's book is organized around what he calls the "long early twentieth century," between 1890 and 1945.[9] Roediger's book is centered around this period deliberately. For Roediger, this period "was defined by the mass arrival of new immigrants beginning in the 1890s and by their victories and defeats in struggling for full political, cultural, and economic citizenship."[10]

Roediger and Jacobson take long views of the role of whiteness in American immigration history, although in different ways. Jacobson's book traces the transformation of new European immigrants into the broader category of "white" in the U.S. beginning all the way back in 1790

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[6] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 12.
[7] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*,125.
[8] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 14.
[9] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 9.
[10] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness,* 9.

and up to the Civil Rights movement. His conclusion focuses on the importance of this history for the present day. A work that takes a long view like this is ambitious and helps to fill in gaps in our historiography, though it may not be able to be as specific as a work that takes a limited view. It can be argued that Roediger, while focusing on a more narrow span of time, uses a wider variety of sources for his project.[11] He points this out as a difference between the books. Again, while Roediger admires Jacobson's book, he writes that

> The elegance and drama of Jacobson's account comes at some cost. In order to generate a neater narrative of movement towards whiteness, Jacobson assumes at times that the key sites of racial transformation are legal and intellectual. To summarize the triumph of the myth of a common 'Caucasian-ness' in those venues represents a formidable task but avoids the welter of further problems raised when we think of whitening as a process in social history in which countless quotidian activities informed popular and expert understandings of the race of new immigrants, as well as new immigrant understandings of race.[12]

Bringing in these social history and popular culture sources is a more difficult task for a book covering practically all of the history of the United States, but they do add a fascinating and significant dimension to the subject. Roediger occasionally includes literary and film sources to add to his census and legislative sources. Both authors acknowledge that the study of race is likewise convoluted and complicated no matter which period or sources are examined, however. Their books are organized deliberately to try and bring clarity to what Jacobson calls "an untidy affair."[13]

The books have related takeaways that highlight the ways that their scholarship speaks to the contemporary situation in U.S. race relations This circles back to their arguments that the immigrants we now consider to be "white" were able to gain this status at the expense of people of color. Roediger's conclusion uses a Frank Sinatra short film from 1945 called *The House I*

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[11] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 9.
[12] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 8.
[13] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 5.

Live In to illustrate the differences in status between immigrants of different national origins. Some immigrants found themselves included in this film as Americans, while others did not make the cut. Specifically, Roediger is able to highlight the difference in treatment between Italian and Japanese immigrants, especially considering that both Italy and Japan were axis powers at war with America.[14] Sinatra, Italian himself, made the film as part of his project against intolerance, but the film did not depict any people of color. Rather, it focused on white American diversity, seeking to avoid any controversy.[15] Sinatra's vision for the project was inspired by his own family's history of immigration from Italy, but Roediger emphasizes the privilege gained by Italians in the U.S. by this point that allowed Sinatra to have the platform to speak out on these issues. He writes "That no such racial /national baggage prevented Sinatra from speaking to and for the United States illustrated the extent to which Italian Americans could now feel at home in the nation and helped account for the ease with which the film baited 'Japs'- the only racialized group actually mentioned in *The House I Live In*."[16] Roediger's takeaway is that there are important differences in the realities for different groups of Americans despite what is most often a shared immigrant background.

Part of Jacobson's message for readers is similarly related to the different realities for those descended from immigrants. He recognizes that there are reasons for white Americans today to want to distance themselves from the privilege that comes with that status, and sometimes that distancing is done by pointing to their immigrant relatives' status as "racial Others."[17] While it is true that these new European immigrants were seen as being racially different and they faced difficulty because of it, Jacobson criticizes those "who would disavow

[14] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness,* 240-241.
[15] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 236-237.
[16] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness,* 240-241.
[17] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 7.

their whiteness even while they live lives predicated upon its privileges."[18] *Whiteness of a Different Color* was written in the late 1990s and, because of that context, affirmative action was a major reason that white Americans felt the need to distance themselves from their identity as white. Jacobson addresses this at the end of the conclusion and he goes on to make it clear that his book is not meant to give fodder to those Americans.[19] Instead, he concludes with the hope that "in recognizing the historical fabrication, the changeability, and the contingencies of whiteness, we might begin to look in a new way upon race, the power relations it generates, and the social havoc it wreaks."[20]

The story of the Polish immigrants to Milwaukee can also be viewed with similar lenses to those used by Roediger and Jacobson. These include understanding that there was a time when the Poles in Milwaukee would have been viewed as racially different, despite our current day understandings of ethnicity, understanding the important changes that were taking place in the 20th century when these European immigrants experienced being in-between insider and outsider status in America, as well as understanding that there were crucial differences for status in the United States over time between immigrants depending on where their countries of origin were.

Polish immigrants began arriving in Milwaukee as early as, by some accounts, 1846, but historians place their arrival to the city around the 1850s.[21] Their presence was felt more strongly by the 1870s, however, and it was then that the local newspapers began to print accounts of what these new immigrants were like. *The Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* released an article entitled "The Polacks" on November 30, 1874 that described the habits of the new immigrants disparagingly.

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[18] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 7.
[19] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 280.
[20] Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 280.
[21] Donald Pienko, "Poles," Encyclopedia of Milwaukee, https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/poles/.

Their poverty was highlighted: "There will doubtless be much suffering among them the coming winter. Many are at present out of work, and nearly all are poor."[22] The reporter also described the people's physical attributes, seemingly to highlight the differences between the Polish immigrants and white Americans. He wrote that "the men, as a rule, are low sized and rather awkward looking; they are, however, very strong and healthy, and possess great powers of endurance. The women are thick-waisted, and homely."[23] This characterization makes the new arrivals into a monolith and plays into racial stereotypes that the Poles were naturally strong. Additionally, he criticized the lack of assimilation to American culture among the Poles, especially their refusal to learn English and their habit to live close together, but their tendency to vote is noted as well.[24] The reporter was not the only one to take notice of the new immigrants and their poor status upon arrival to Milwaukee. Prominent Milwaukeean, William George Bruce, recalled memories in his 1937 memoir of encountering Polish immigrants before they had even had a chance to find a permanent home to settle into:

> ...it [was] one of the sights to behold these anxious immigrant men and women and abashed children nestled among the boxes, bundles and bedding of an old-world household…they were travel-stained, poor, and uninformed, but they were hopeful, courageous, and ambitious as they looked toward the wooded lands south of Greenfield Avenue…[25]

Life in Milwaukee could be difficult for these new immigrants, as described previously, and conditions in the south side of the city could be unhealthy and dangerous. They worked laborious jobs in Milwaukee's tanneries, steel and iron mills, meat-processing plants as well as in

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[22] *"The Polacks," The Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* November 30, 1874, p.2 *Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3001896086/NCNP?u=milw97470&sid=bookmark-NCNP&pg=2&xid=d7b6e0b4.
[23] "The Polacks," 2.
[24] "The Polacks," 2.
[25] Judith T. Kenny, "Polish Routes to Americanization," in *Wisconsin Land and Life*, ed. By Robert C. Ostergren and Thomas R. Vale, (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 269.

construction.[26] Milwaukee's south side, where the largest portion of the Polish population lived, struggled with issues of "poor sanitation, crowding, and high infant and epidemic mortality rates."[27] The poorer sections of the city, which included this area, suffered from the spread of cholera and typhoid.[28] However, despite how devastating diseases like diphtheria and tuberculosis affected Milwaukee in the 19th century, Milwaukeeans reserved a special fear for smallpox.[29] Judith Leavitt's book, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform,* devotes a chapter to the city's response to smallpox specifically. While city health officials promoted vaccination as a way to fight the illness, the process was still not standardized and the recommendation drew skepticism and fear from those living in the city.[30] The first waves of smallpox affected Germans disproportionally, but a later wave of smallpox between 1876-1877 affected Polish immigrants as well.[31] The disease's spread to the south side of Milwaukee played into wider nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment that already considered new immigrants to be dirty. Leavitt writes "Because smallpox concentrated in the south side, where most of the newer, nonimmune, and unvaccinated immigrants lived, settled Milwaukeeans blamed them for its presence."[32] Access to utilities was also an issue for Milwaukee's south side immigrants, especially access to clean water. This left those living in the area to be more at risk for disease and fire damage. Historian Kate Foss-Mollan looked at fire insurance maps for the years 1895 and 1910 in Milwaukee and saw that the fire hazard categories were higher for Polish wards in

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[26] Pienkos, "Poles."
[27] Kate Foss-Mollan, "Waiting for Water: Service Discrimination and Polish Neighborhoods in Milwaukee, 1870-1910," *Michigan Historical Review* 25, no.2 (Fall 1999): 32.
[28] Foss-Mollan, "Waiting for Water," 35.
[29] Judith Leavitt, *The Healthiest City: Milwaukee and the Politics of Health Reform* (Princeton University Press, 1982), 76.
[30] Leavitt, *The Healthiest City*, 76-81.
[31] Leavitt, *The Healthiest City*, 85.
[32] Leavitt, The Healthiest City, 90.

the city compared to the rest of the city.[33] The Polish neighborhoods were finally supplied with water, as well as services like sewers, street paving, and increased streetcar service, after the election of socialist Emil Seidel as mayor in 1910.[34]

Despite sanitary issues and lack of money, these new immigrants considered home-ownership to be a priority. They had been peasants working the land in Poland, but they did not want that for themselves in Milwaukee. Historian Judith Kenny considers the Polish immigrant focus on home ownership to have been an early Polish route to Americanization. The Poles made sacrifices in order to build homes for themselves. They also worked together in order to fulfill these goals. Polish immigrants to Milwaukee established Polish building and loan associations.[35] They built raised cottage homes that were colloquially referred to as Polish Flats. These were similar to the duplexes that were common in Milwaukee, but they could be built incrementally as the owner amassed enough money to add onto the structure. Once they could afford to raise their cottage onto posts, they could add a basement and charge rent for that space until they could afford to occupy the entire space.[36] Kenny recalls the story of one Polish immigrant family who, after the eldest of their seven children got married in 1914, reconstructed a first floor flat so their son could begin his married life.[37] These flats provided extra space for large immigrant families, as well as the opportunity for upward mobility. They also doubtless contributed to the aforementioned accusations of overcrowding in Milwaukee's south side. Homeownership has been, and continues to be, a symbol for the ideal American life and access to homeownership has been an unequal option in the United States.

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[33] Foss-Mollan, "Waiting for Water," 43.
[34] Foss-Mollan, "Waiting for Water," 44.
[35] Kenny, "Polish Routes to Americanization," 271.
[36] Kenny, "Polish Routes to Americanization," 275-277.
[37] Kenny, "Polish Routes to Americanization," 277.

The Polish community growing in Milwaukee saw the importance of taking care of their own since they did not always have the welcome of the rest of the wider community. It is not uncommon for immigrants to establish and run their own institutions that cater to their own particular needs, whether that be through establishing building and loan associations as previously discussed, producing newspapers in their native language, establishing religious institutions, or opening shops that sell the food that reminds immigrants of home. One important institution in the Milwaukee Polish community was the Kuryer Agency, formed in 1919 in response to the barrage of questions the Kuryer Polski newspaper received in the wake of Poland's independence, that worked to help Poles get from Europe to the United States as well as to help the Polish community occasionally travel back home for trips.[38]

As the community was building, the issue of citizenship was a central issue. The logistics of getting to the United States from Europe were difficult to navigate, as was the legal immigration process that, especially as the 1920s developed, only became more convoluted. The growing popularity of the eugenics movement in the United States led to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924, which, according to historian Mae Ngai, "marked both the end of one era, that of open immigration from Europe, and the beginning of a new one, the era of immigration restriction."[39] Now, immigration to the U.S. was granted based on a quota system that was itself based on older U.S. census data that helped to favor immigrants from the more desirable western and northern European countries. Immigration from Asia was banned altogether. While this legislation would actually later facilitate changes in labor and the racial

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[38] "Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961" [finding aid], University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, accessed December 12, 2025. https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/wiarchives.uw-mil-uwmmss0046

[39] Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 17.

makeup of cities that would benefit the next generations of Polish immigrants, it was a blow to efforts for immigrants seeking a life in the United States at the time. The Kuryer Agency records indicate confusion for the agency members and clients in Milwaukee in the 1920s and early 1930s. A 1928 Department of Labor pamphlet received by the agency lays out new rules for immigration over the course of eight pages, opening with the following recommendation: "All interested persons are urged to study this bulletin carefully; by doing so they will save themselves possibly misdirected effort, annoyance, and delay."[40]

While some of the documents created by the Kuryer Agency have been lost to time, many case files have still been preserved and they contain traces of the hard work that went into making arrangements and filing applications for immigrants. The agency worked closely with shipping lines, such as the Gdynia America Line, and with railway companies, such as Wabash Railway Company. In a letter to Gdynia America Line representative J. Zaleski, the Kuryer Agency laments that they have to cancel tickets for a woman and her adult son because "these people did not have any documents ready, but wanted to sail as early as June 2nd. Not being citizens, they did not realize how much red tape had to be gone through, and how much time was required."[41] The process was frustrating for the agency as well as for the immigrants experiencing what may have felt like lengthy wait times and uncertainty. Keeping track of the immigration policy changes in the United States in the early 20th century was already difficult, but Kuryer Agency agents also had Poland's rules to consider. In another letter to the Gdynia America Line, Helen Faltynski inquired "if any changes have occurred in the regulations and

[40] Harry E. Hull, Department of Labor pamphlet, 24 July 1928, p.1, UWM Mss 46, box 5, folder 39, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[41] Kuryer Agency letter to Gdynia America Line, May 10, 1937, UWM Mss 46, box 1, folder 18, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

fees regarding Polish passports, citizenship, affidavits of support, and the like, please let us know."[42]

As the associated Kuryer Agency represents, immigrant communities must create their own institutions to support their needs, especially when they are still seeking a stable place in the wider community's hierarchy. An ethnic press helped feed those who were "hungry for the Polish printed word in what was still to them a new and strange land."[43] *The Kuryer Polski* was established in 1888 by Michael Kruszka back in the early days of Polish immigration to Milwaukee. Originally a small operation, *The Kuryer Polski's* own reported history recalls startup capital of only $125 and a modest workforce: "there were at that time but three employees - two printers and one carrier - and 250 subscribers."[44] As the Polish population in Milwaukee more than doubled from 30,000 at the end of the 1880s to 70,000 in 1910, *The Kuryer Polski* saw increases in its subscriptions and its value.[45] By their own account, the paper's value was $50,000 in 1906, proving just how popular the paper was with Polish Americans at the turn of the century.[46] As the paper increased in value, it also needed a larger building to house its operation. *The Kuryer Polski* moved its offices into the building that had previously been occupied by an ethnic German press at the corner of Broadway and Mason

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[42] Kuryer Agency letter to Gdynia America Line, January 11, 1938, UWM Mss 46, box 1, folder 18, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[43] J.A. Kapmarski, "The Kuryer Polski," in *We, the Milwaukee Poles: The History of Milwaukeeans of Polish Descent and a Record of their Contributions to the Greatness of Milwaukee (*Nowiny Publishing Company, 1946), 53.
[44] "Kuryer is Oldest Polish Daily Newspaper in U.S.," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 18, 1939, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[45] Pienkos, "Poles."
[46] "Kuryer is Oldest Polish Daily Newspaper in U.S.," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 18, 1939, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

streets in 1906.[47] This move could be read as symbolic: the Poles in Milwaukee were able to move into a space formerly owned by the dominant ethnic group in the city and thus gain some legitimacy and power themselves.

The Kuryer Polski began by publishing its weekly paper in Polish. While this was necessary back when the community was still building itself and the primary language was their native Polish, the community's needs changed after generations had become more Americanized. Most of Milwaukee's Polish immigrants came during the earlier waves of Polish immigration prior to 1939 and thus over time the numbers of second-generation American children of Polish immigrants began to grow quickly compared to immigrants directly from Europe.[48] *The Kuryer Polski* began to publish an additional paper in English alongside the original in 1917. This was a temporary project meant to reach and inform Americans about Poland's situation and it was scrapped after Poland became independent the following year.[49] The paper decided to bring back an English counterpart to *The Kuryer Polski* called *The American Courier* in 1939 directed towards the attention of the younger generation and even its title emphasized being American over being Polish. While *The Kuryer Polski* "moulded the opinions of the older generation and directed its thinking toward the goal of citizenship," *The American Courier* served a new purpose to "reflect the opinions of this younger generation of Americans and to record its participation in business, social and political life."[50] The paper was adapting to the community's

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[47] "Kuryer is Oldest Polish Daily Newspaper in U.S.," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 18, 1939, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[48] Pienkos, "Poles."
[49] "Why the American Courier Fills a Need in Milwaukee," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 20, 1939, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[50] "Why the American Courier Fills a Need in Milwaukee," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 20, 1939, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

new focus on higher aspirations than simply obtaining citizenship and getting to the United States, but on involvement in wider society. It is also telling that the *Kuryer* thought it more appealing to the youth to publish in English. This must have marked a shift in cultural practices related to the language spoken most commonly at home. A story ran in the April 13, 1939 edition of the paper lamenting that young Polish-Americans did not have more sources for understanding their culture's contributions to American history and culture.[51] According to the article, the language barrier between the generations is a major contributing factor since the work in history at that point had been primarily in Polish and other sources for understanding more about Polish influences in American life were appearing in the Polish press.[52] *The American Courier* was also presented differently than the older newspaper had been: in tabloid form with special sports and women's pages.[53]

Though *The Kuryer Polski's* history often reflects the positive changes occurring for the community in Milwaukee, anxieties still crept in and made themselves apparent in its pages even as late as 1938. A packet compiled by the newspaper of *The Kuryer Polski's* history, organization, and advertising opportunities for distribution prominently features a section dedicated to the subject "Kuryer Editorial Upholds Freedom and Equal Rights."[54] This section is made up of a reprinting and translation of an earlier editorial that ran in *The Kuryer Polski* on December 10, 1938. The editorial is effusive in its praise for America's ideals and just as vehement in its hate for Nazi Germany. While the Nazis had not yet invaded Poland and the U.S.

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[51] *The American Courier*, 13 April 1939, 4 on microfilm from the Milwaukee Public Library
[52] *The American Courier*, 13 April 1939, 4. on microfilm from the Milwaukee Public Library
[53] "Why the American Courier Fills a Need in Milwaukee," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 20, 1939, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[54] "Kuryer Editorial Upholds Freedom and Equal Rights," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 27, 1939, p. 1, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

would not enter the war until the end of 1941, the Polish community in Milwaukee was kept abreast of the upheaval spreading in Europe and were against the isolationist policies being embraced by some factions in the U.S. The editorial focuses on how fortunate Americans are to live in a "free and independent nation."[55]While Poles in America were pushed out of Europe for a variety of factors, the editorial shows the realization for the community that "Europe today cannot be held out of the world as that sphere of the civilized world which adheres to racial and religious tolerance; rather it must be accepted as being intolerant with respect to religious and racial discrimination."[56] Many Polish Milwaukeeans did travel back to Poland and they kept in touch with the communities there through the Kuryer Agency. With war breaking out, that would not be possible. Now, preserving their home in America may have been even more important for Polish Milwaukeeans. The editorial, while celebrating America, warns readers that we are not immune to the racial and religious prejudice in Nazi Germany and, remarkably, much of the article focuses on the treatment of the Jews in Nazi Europe. This is surprising given how common antisemitism was at the time, as well as the role that antisemitism plays specifically in Poland's history.

The writer acknowledges that the Nazis are attempting an "extermination campaign" against the Jews and that "here too, we find persons who would like to follow in the footsteps of their European counterparts in disseminating racial hatreds, and in importuning extinction of this or that helpless racial minority."[57]The 1930s in the U.S. were a time of anxiety for American

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[55] "Kuryer Editorial Upholds Freedom and Equal Rights," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 27, 1939, 1, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[56] "Kuryer Editorial Upholds Freedom and Equal Rights," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 27, 1939, 1, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[57] "Kuryer Editorial Upholds Freedom and Equal Rights," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 27, 1939, 1, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Jews and antisemitism was seen in the mainstream in popular figures like Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and radio personality Father Charles Coughlin. The writer here, however, was pushing back against the antisemitic rhetoric of the time and arguing that Christians and Jews had an equal right to be Americans.[58]

Poland has a tense history between its Christian and Jewish population, which had historically broken out in violent pogroms against the minority Jewish communities. Roediger's book discusses some of the ways that immigrants learned and leaned into the racist hierarchies they learned about upon arrival to the United States as well as the different forms of racism that they brought with them from their countries of origin. He considers the difference between ideas of WOA, or, "white on arrival," and his updated idea of RTBC, or, "race thinkers before coming."[59] Immigrants may have been new to American forms of racism, but the places they came from had their own histories of clashes between different peoples and their own racial hierarchies. This had an effect on relations in the U.S. at times and allowed for "speedy learning of racial systems in the United States."[60] An example that Roediger cites is tension between Italian Americans and Black Americans in the wake of Fascist Italy's imperialist conquest of Ethiopia. According to Roediger's research, this led to increases in racist behavior from Italian immigrants against Black Americans, including arguments made by Italian American journalists to dismiss the grievances of Black Americans and to write about how white supremacy would actually bring Black Americans toward so-called progress.[61] He also writes about the conflicts between northern and southern Italian immigrants in the United States that came from prior

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[58] "Kuryer Editorial Upholds Freedom and Equal Rights," Kuryer Polski Advertising File Packet, July 27, 1939, 1, UWM Mss 46, box 8, folder 10, Kuryer Publishing Company Records, 1893-1961, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
[59] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 110-111.
[60] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 110.
[61] Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 112.

tensions in Europe.[62] Following this logic, it may have been the case that the Polish immigrants brought antisemitic feelings with them from Poland. There is some evidence that there was tension between Polish immigrants and Jewish immigrants in Milwaukee. Robert Mink found mixed responses in this oral history project on Polish-Jewish relations in Milwaukee from his Jewish interviewees when he asked them about their own, as well as their family's, experiences with the Poles in Milwaukee's south side in the early 1900s. Some, including Claire Krom and Allen Goldmann, could not recall feeling that there was any tension with their Polish clientele at the shops they helped run in Milwaukee's south side.[63] These two men did not live in the neighborhood, rather they commuted to work there. Krom recalled that "Even in this country, if a Pole was sick, he usually went to a Jewish doctor. If a Pole was in trouble, he usually went to a Jewish lawyer."[64] He had accounts at the Polish Mitchell Bank as well.[65] Others could remember tensions and antisemitism in the neighborhood while growing up in the 1910s. This included being called derogatory names, such as "sheeny," "zhyd," and "dirty Jew."[66] Robert Mink mentioned a parade against pogroms taking place in Poland as well as a counter-protest by Poles in Milwaukee, but his interviewee did not remember these events creating any issue for her.[67] Jules Levin remembered his family trying to lay low and not appear well-off so as to not

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[62] Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness, 113-114.
[63] Claire Krom, "Oral History Interview with Claire Krom," interview by Robert Mink, June 25, 1990, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department, *Polish-Jewish Relations in Milwaukee Oral History Project* and Allen Goldmann, "Oral History Interview with Allen Goldmann," June 28, 1990, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department, *Polish Jewish Relations in Milwaukee Oral History Project.*
[64] Claire Krom, interview.
[65] Claire Krom, interview.
[66] Minnie Friedman, "Interview with Minnie Friedman," interview by Robert Mink, June 19, 1990, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department, *Polish-Jewish Relations in Milwaukee Oral History Project* and Jules Levin, "Interview with Jules Levin," interview by Robert Mink, September 3, 1990, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department, *Polish-Jewish Relations in Milwaukee Oral History Project*
[67] Minnie Friedman, interview.

generate any negative attention from neighbors.[68] While there may have been conflict between the communities at times, they did live close and frequent each others' shops and businesses. Some of the previously mentioned articles in *The Kuryer Polski* also stood up for the Jews in Nazi Germany.

Another significant project to consider is a book published by the Casimir Pulaski Council in Milwaukee: *We, the Milwaukee Poles: The History of Milwaukeeans of Polish Descent and a Record of their Contributions to the Greatness of Milwaukee.* The council published this book after WWII in 1946 to commemorate the centennial of the Polish community's presence in Milwaukee and to stake a claim to America.[69] The book's preface concludes by declaring that, because of the contributions described throughout the book, "that Milwaukee's citizens of Polish descent are worthy of the priceless privilege of American citizenship."[70] While this statement illustrates confidence in the Polish community's place in the country, it also illustrates a lingering desire to prove that this is the case because it may not still be obvious. It was a group effort throughout the community and it includes write-ups from various community groups as well as lists of Polish Milwaukeeans who were in the judiciary, in education, in the police department, fire department, and places where community members were attending college.[71] This illustrates how, by 1946, the descendants of the original Polish immigrants to the city were already obtaining high ranking careers and attending college. There are ads from local businesses throughout the book, showing that Polish businesses were still part of the community at the time. It also begins with a plea to the next generations of Poles:

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[68] Jules Levin, interview.
[69] *We, the Milwaukee Poles: The History of Milwaukeeans of Polish Descent and a Record of their Contributions to the Greatness of Milwaukee,* compiled by Thaddeus Borun, (Nowiny Publishing Company, 1946), IV.
[70] John C. Kleczka, "Preface," in *We, the Milwaukee Poles,* X.
[71] *We, the Milwaukee Poles*.

> Read this book, learn of the accomplishments of your forebearers, and take pride in their accomplishments, their patriotism, their sacrifice to make America and Milwaukee great. Read and see what you can do to better the record of those of your own blood who came, lived, worked and built here so that life could be easier and more comfortable and enjoyable for you.[72]

It is obvious that the older members of the Polish community in Milwaukee were concerned with educating their children and subsequent generations about their culture and their prior struggle in the U.S. As much was said in the 1939 issue of *The American Courier* from before. Also significant is that there is much participation from Milwaukeeans outside of the Polish community throughout the book, like a congratulations from the mayor and a letter from the chief of police.[73] U.S. Senator Wiley is featured as saying the following: "Milwaukee owes much to her American sons and daughters of Polish blood. In her industries, in her professions, in her great laboring groups, we see the splendid influence of this virile people which has become American."[74] The language of a peoples' blood is emphasized again, but the senator concludes by declaring that the Polish immigrants who have contributed much to the city have earned the right to be Americans. There was a shift happening in American culture with regards to how the white American culture perceived immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, even if there still remained a measure of insecurity within the community.

As Polish immigrants and their descendants were able to climb the ladder of American society in the early to mid-twentieth century, not every other immigrant group could be as fortunate. Both Roediger and Jacobson argue that the European immigrants that American culture sees as white in the modern day were only able to achieve that coveted status at the expense of other immigrant and minority groups in the United States. Milwaukee was gaining

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[72] Thaddeus Borun, "Foreword," in *We, the Milwaukee Poles*, IV.
[73] *We, the Milwaukee Poles*, XIII and 162.
[74] *We, the Milwaukee Poles*, 128.

Mexican immigrants and African American laborers as early as the 1920s to fill the vacuum left after restricting immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe.[75] Some of these Mexican immigrants were brought in to be strikebreakers in the 1920s at the Pfister and Vogel tannery in Milwaukee, something that was likely at odds with the union supporting Milwaukee Poles. Some Mexican immigrants were able to find housing in the south side of Milwaukee in Polish flats, which were similarly attractive for them as multifamily housing options.[76] As Mexican immigration to Milwaukee ebbed and flowed, their communities were similarly centered around their places of work and around the Catholic churches in the south side. They too published their own newspapers, such as *La Guardia,* and set up their own mutual help organizations like the Esperanza Unida. The Esperanza Unida was established in 1971 in order to help the Latino community in the south side of Milwaukee get job training.[77] They also published a bilingual newspaper called *La Verdad* or, in English, *The Truth*. The newspaper helped to serve the group's mission to uplift the south side Latino community and its pages contained articles about "A Way Off Welfare that Makes Sense," and ads for prospects like "Business Opportunity for Women with Children" or even for used cars for sale.[78]

The south side neighborhood began to become more Mexican and Latino in its makeup as the twentieth century marched on. As the descendants of Polish immigrants became citizens and had a pathway to citizenship, the same could not be said for Mexican and Latino immigrants. They also had less opportunity for housing options. In 1938, the Home Owner's Loan

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[75] Joseph A. Rodriguez, "Mexicans," Encyclopedia of Milwaukee entry, https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/mexicans/.
[76] Rodriguez, "Mexicans."
[77]"Esperanza Unida Records, 1982-1990, undated" [finding aid], University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives Department, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, accessed December 12, 2025. https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/wiarchives.uw-mil-uwmmss0420
[78] Richard Oulahan, *La Verdad*, March 1990, 2-6. UWM Mss 420, box 1, folder 6, Esperanza Unida Records, 1982-1990, undated, UWM Archives, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Corporation, set up as part of the New Deal programs in the wake of the Great Depression, created a map in Milwaukee to determine which neighborhoods were the riskiest by, in large part, tying racial makeup of an area to land value. This criterion found that the neighborhood in Milwaukee's south side with the highest Polish population was a security grade D.[79] This is the lowest rating within their system. The report discusses the Polish makeup of the area, including the prevalence of the Polish Flat style of home, but it is telling that their "detrimental influences" for the neighborhood are unrelated to the Poles, but are concerned with "Mexicans coming into northeast corner."[80] The map descriptions even have their own category for tracking the population of Black Americans.[81] The Poles were still notable in 1938, but the Mexican population was a larger concern, illustrating the shift that was starting to take place concerning how Americans perceived the race of European immigrants, especially when compared to immigrants from other continents and Black Americans.

While the postwar situation in Poland led to some continued immigration of Poles from Europe and the community did stay concentrated in Milwaukee's south side for longer than the descendants of other European immigrants, many of the organizations that kept Polish life in Milwaukee running nonetheless began to disappear or change in the latter half of the 20th century.[82] In one study on Polish parochial schools in Milwaukee the author found that wider Milwaukee trends were influencing enrollment at the schools: "The cultural changes in the school are closely connected with the social transformation taking place in the environment.

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[79] Home Owner's Loan Corporation 1938 Map of Milwaukee County from Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, et al. "Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America." Edited by Robert K. Nelson. American Panorama: An Atlas of United States History, 2023.https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/map/WI/MilwaukeeCo/area_descriptions/D11#loc=12/43.0093/-87.9748.

[80] HOLC Map of Milwaukee County, "Mapping Inequality."

[81] HOLC Map of Milwaukee County, "Mapping Inequality."

[82] John Gurda, "Milwaukee's Historic South Side: Poles then, Latinos now," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 2 August 2013, https://archive.jsonline.com/news/opinion/218125601.html/.

Polish families moving out to the wealthier suburban areas are replaced by poor, often unemployed non-white minorities. In June 1989, out of 145 students in the school, 43 had Polish surnames; there were also 42 Spanish-speaking pupils, 5 American Indians, 2 blacks, and 4 Asians or Pacific Islanders."[83] The Kuryer Agency, discussed previously, ceased to exist after WWII began. Its companion newspaper, *The Kuryer Polski*, stopped publishing in 1962. A Milwaukee Fine Arts Group disbanded in 1949. The Polish businesses in Milwaukee's south side gradually closed. When considering the cultural makeup of Milwaukee's historic south side, local historian John Gurda writes "Kunzelmann-Esser is now an apartment building, Goldmann's is a memory, and the bridal shops have dwindled to a couple. Although Mitchell St. is still a bustling commercial corridor, most of its current business is done in Spanish."[84] The nature of the groups that did continue to exist changed as well. Rather than mutual aid groups or services in Polish, groups emphasizing pride in Polish heritage emerged. Donald Pienkos writes of this change in American Polish involvement that "fewer are more than tangentially involved in Polonia's life (aside from attending the annual Polish Fest). There are fewer active secular and church-based Polish American organizations."[85] The annual Polish Fest on Milwaukee's lakeshore is one example of an enduring tradition for the American-Polish community in Milwaukee. Another is the events put on by the Polish Center of Wisconsin in nearby Franklin, Wisconsin. This is part of the process of Americanization, where the embrace of white, American culture naturally led to the loss of some of the unique cultural practices of the next generations of Polish immigrants.

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[83] Dorota Praszałowicz, "The Cultural Changes of Polish-American Parochial Schools in Milwaukee, 1866-1988," *The Journal of American Ethnic History* 13, no.4 (1994): 37.
[84] Gurda, "Milwaukee's Historic South Side."
[85] Pienkos, "Poles."

Milwaukee has transformed since the south side was home to a bustling, majority Polish neighborhood, even if the old Polish churches continue to loom large and the General Kosciuszko statue still watches over Lincoln Avenue. According to historian Sergio Gonzalez, in response to this change, "many Catholic priests on the city's now predominantly Spanish-speaking south side adopted the saying, 'We bury in Polish, we baptize in Spanish.'"[86] As of 2010, 70% of the historic south side's population was Latino, while another 11% was made up of Black Milwaukeeans.[87] This community has much in common with the Polish immigrant community from the late 19th century. They work laborious and low-paying jobs, bring their native Spanish to Milwaukee, form mutual aid groups and bilingual newspapers, as well as center their communities around the Catholic church. However, despite similarities, there are also important differences to consider. While Polish immigrants and their descendants have been able to become citizens and assimilate into dominant American culture as another white ethnic group, finding employment in professional careers and housing in suburbs and near well-funded schools, the Latino immigrants today have not had the same opportunity. While the Polish community in Milwaukee was gaining confidence in their place in America in the 1930s and 1940s, the Latino community in Milwaukee was just starting to grow.

[86] Sergio Gonzalez, *"*'I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me': Latino Immigration, Religion, and Community Formation in Milwaukee, 1920-1990*,"* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018): 23.
[87] Gurda, "Milwaukee's Historic South Side."