

Poland in 1854—1855

As of 1795, Poland no longer existed as an independent political entity. It had been wiped off the map, swallowed up by Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Russia's church was Orthodox. Austria was primarily Catholic, but Emperor Franz Joseph was closely allied with Russia, indebted for political reasons. In Prussia, which controlled the former Polish territory of Silesia, Protestantism had been established as the state religion in 1539. The Roman Catholic Church was the unifying factor among the Polish people. It was through the Church that traditions, language, and cultural identity were maintained. The same would be true one hundred and thirty-eight years later... 8,000 miles away.

In the years immediately preceding the emigrations of the 1850's, Silesia had suffered a number of epidemics, floods and crop failures, including the same potato blight that ravaged Ireland. Economic conditions, crime, and Prussian conscription of the Polish males played havoc on the people and their means of survival, which was mainly farming.

Into this climate of despair came letters from one of their own, Fr. Leopold Moczygemba, a Franciscan priest serving as a missionary in Texas. His letters encouraged them to sell everything and join him in a land of political and religious freedom. The future was so threatening for these Silesians, they were willing to sell all for whatever price they could get, uproot their families, and move across the world, all on the recommendation of one man.

The Founding of Martinez 1855 (name changed to St. Hedwig in 1868)

The sea voyage took two months. After landing on the Texas coast, most of the group went to Panna Maria, the Polish American colony in America, founded by Fr. Leopold. But thirteen families traveled to Martinez Creek to land that John Deuxner, a German acquaintance of Fr. Leopold, had told them about. Finding it suitable, with trees for fuel and building, and fertile soil for crops, Adam and Mariana Pierdola, Martin and Frances Pierdola, Joseph Mihalski, Florentine Tudyk, Mikolaj and Franciska Tudyk, Jacob Zaiontz, Thomas Krawietz, Anton and Frances Kosub, Frank and Mary Kosub, Martin and Marya Cibis, Valentine Aniol, Paul and Franciszka Kaszmarek and Walter and Cecelia Stanush brought their families and possessions to this place east of San Antonio.

Life in the first years was difficult. Dealing with people whose language they did not speak, and often disappointed by the quality of the supplies here, they found themselves turning to John Dorstyn for help. He was known and respected for his honest dealings with Poles and Americans alike. A Polish immigrant himself, he had married an American. Both he and Demmer and their wives are buried in the St. Hedwig Cemetery.

Building log homes with thatched roofs and raising crops for food and marketing were the priorities, but constructing a church began soon after arrival. The settlement's first church was complete by the autumn of 1857. It was a log building built on the property of Ludwig Zaiontz, less than a mile northwest

of the present church. The first baptism recorded in the new parish was on December 2, 1857. The child baptized was Francis Pierdola, infant son of Martin and Frances Pierdola. It was performed by Fr. Julian Przysiecki. Assigned to Panna Maria, he died at the age of 38. His grave with the headstone inscribed in Latin, can still be seen in the St. Hedwig Cemetery.

In 1867 Fr. Zwiardowski, a newly ordained priest of 26, was assigned to the parish. He found a strong community of 34 families. He immediately began two important projects. The first was education. His first summer in Martinez found him holding classes for the children. Not only did he teach five hours a day, he also hand-copied educational materials for the students. His other project was the building of a new church. The population having doubled, they would soon outgrow the small log structure that had served the original settlers.

Immediately he set about collecting funds, materials and promises of labor. The land for the new building was donated by Martin Pierdola, Joseph Mihalski, Anton Tudyk, and Thomas Krawietz. The stone was carried from Blanco in mule drawn wagons. The blessing of the cornerstone took place on April 25, 1868. Construction was completed before the end of the year. The building was 76 feet long, 30 feet wide and 30 feet high. sometime soon afterward, the small cemetery was moved closer to the new church.

The Parish School

By 1870 St. Hedwig was linked to San Antonio by a decent road and the town was prospering. The population was increasing and the need for a school was faced by Fr. Vincent Barzynski. In March of '74 a 56 foot by 30-foot building with classrooms and rooms for the teachers was completed. With this, St. Hedwig became the second of the Silesian communities to have its own school building. First the Immaculate Conception Sisters (the Blue Nuns), then the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, and finally the Feliciana Sisters staffed the school until its demise in 1969.

Church Enlargement

As early as 1892, the resident priest, Fr. Dabrowski, had requested from the diocese permission to enlarge the church. By 1900, the parish had increased from the 34 families of Fr. Zwiardowski's time to 200. It was the largest Polish parish in the diocese and the second—largest in Texas. The church building was much too small and so plans were made for an extensive enlargement. Under the direction of Fr. Theodore Jaron, the addition was carefully planned to match the design of the original building. The new church was 45 feet wide by 124 feet long.

Due to its proximity to San Antonio, good water, and workable soil, the community continued to grow. By 1915, there were 1,448 Catholics recorded. The resulting increased income allowed Fr. Paul Mosler, in 1909, to have the tower of the church extended into a steeple, with a cross mounted at the top. Children who were watching the procedure were showered with candy from a bag carried by the man setting up the cross. And in 1916, a new rectory was built.

In 1924, it was decided to add one more addition to the church structure. Fr. Stanislaus Przyborowski had the sacristies and room behind the sanctuary added. At the same time, the interior of the church was repainted.

Religious Organizations

The years before and after World War I saw an increase in the number of religious societies that were active for varying lengths of time. The Rosary Society and the Sacred Heart Society had been in existence since the 1800's, as well as the St. Francis Xavier Society (for the Propagation of the Faith). The latter reappears in parish records during WWI and again later just before the Depression. Also shown are: The Society for the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament; the St. Cecelia Society; Children of Mary (begun before the war, and extended into the 1960's); the Holy Angels or Guardian Angels; Scapular of Mt. Carmel; and St. Stanislaus Kostka. Even later would appear the Society of the Holy Childhood, the apostleship of Prayer, and the Holy Name Society (whose members at one time served as ushers for Mass; it lasted at least until the early '70's).

World War II and Afterwards

By 1938 parish records show only 800 members. St. Hedwig was still very much a closely - knit Polish community. Up until this time there had been very little intermarriage with non—Poles and even less with non-Catholics. Polish was still the primary language spoken. In the 1920's, Sister Veronica had to order English catechisms so that the children could learn their prayers in English for Confirmation. (In 1955, the Stations of the Cross were still conducted in Polish.) But like the rest of the world during the war, St. Hedwig was concentrating on it and the safety of the area youth who were serving in the military. The war effort even affected the church building itself: a discussion of church repairs was postponed to see what defense needs would do to the price of the necessary materials.

The early '50 's saw a catching—up on repairs and renovation. In '54 the exterior was replastered; the steeple cross replaced; the floor repaired; new electric wiring installed; and the altars repainted and regilded. All this was in preparation for the upcoming centennial.

The Centennial

The Centennial, commemorating the founding of the community, was highlighted by a Pastoral Mass presided over by Archbishop Robert Lucey. At least five other priests took part; sermons were in English and Polish. After Mass, a picnic was held at the American Legion Hall. Lunch and dinner were served, a band provided music all day, and children of the school presented a program. Several state and county officials attended. An exhibition of articles belonging to the first settlers, including a brass key said to be to the door of the first church and one of the first repeating rifles in the Southwest, owned by Fr. Zwiardowski for protection against the Indians who still roamed the area in his day.

During this era, other societies were formed: a men's Rosary Society, the Knights of the Altar, the Junior Newman Club and a Youth Club. An addition was made to the rectory in 1956 for the assistant pastor.

In 1958 they received a new bell from a set cast in Holland. It had been donated Archdiocese by the Extension Society and given to Annunciation Church simply on request. It joined three other bells already hanging in the belfry whose history has become muddled over the years. A story that the bells had "Godparents" is told. These people were supposedly responsible for their delivery from the Carpenter Post Office to the church.

The names of Kalka, Kaczmarek, Strzelceyk, and Ziginond have been mentioned. However, a recent inspection by two curious parishioners (to settle the question) has revealed the names on the largest as

ANDREW STRZELCZYK, and KAROL Zygmunt on the medium-sized one. The smallest has the inscription: "McNeely's, West Troy, New York 1860". Perhaps it is the original one lovingly purchased by the first parishioners and named "Gabriel" -The fourth bell disappeared during the time a mechanical timing system was being installed in the '70's.

Stories abound among the men who rang the bells by hand during their youth. It was a break from classroom study for the students; it became a contest of sorts (one boy could balance the bell, leaving it straight up, only to fall later and ring "by itself"); going into the belfry stall (choir loft) gave them a chance to play tricks on the kids below, such as making them dodge eggs stolen from the nests of birds who built their homes in the steeple area. Another chore for the young boys was to reset the four tower clocks. The clock faces were covered in 1954, but the mechanisms still remain. In 1959 the grotto on the southwest side of the church was erected by the Rosary Society in honor of the centennial of the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. Under the direction of Rev. Michael McManus, the Nocturnal Adoration Society and the People '5 Eucharistic League were begun (the latter because only men could gain indulgences attached to the Nocturnal Adoration Society.)

The sixties brought more changes. The liturgical directives that accompanied Vatican II included the mandate that the priest face the congregation, resulting in the installation of a new marble altar in 1969. It was consecrated by Archbishop Francis Furey on November 30th of that year. Another change was the establishment of St. Ann's Church in La Vernia (up until now, a mission of St. Hedwig) as an independent parish. In November, '65, Rev. Benjamin Bonazza became its first pastor. Then in '69, the parish school closed for economic reasons. The Felician Sisters who had served since 1935, were the last major contact the children of the parish would have with nuns on a daily basis.

In 1961 the cemetery was enlarged by a three-acre addition. By 1968, the entire cemetery was in need of extensive repair work. Under Fr. Frank Foster's direction, curbs were removed (they had made mowing nearly impossible), headstones were straightened, and sunken areas filled in. A mausoleum was erected in 1972.

During the same period new stained-glass windows were installed and carpeting added in the church ('71) and air-conditioning added in '73. Also, during this time some statues were removed along with some of the original ornamentations (e.g., the fancy woodwork above the pedestals for the statues) to simplify. The years were taking their toll on the interior walls, etc. Simple touch-up jobs would no longer suffice.

After the death of Fr. Foster, Fr. Bill Zadora was appointed pastor. He is the first native—born Polish priest to serve the parish since Fr. Ernest Kostorz. Under his guidance, many Polish customs have been revitalized. The 5 PM Mass on Saturdays is well attended by both the young and old congregation members. He initiated the traditional Wigilia celebration at Christmas time, complete with the sharing of the Oplatek and singing of "Kolendas", Polish Christmas carols. During this season the church becomes a "little Bethlehem" replicating the mountain—stable scenes so popular in the churches in Europe. Easter is preceded with realistic representations of the crucifixion, followed by the sight of the entombed Christ on Good Friday and the Risen Christ on Easter. May crowning have been revived and weekly devotions to Our Mother of Perpetual Help begun (together with a society under her patronage). On a pilgrimage to Poland in 91, Fr. Bill was presented with a relic of St. Hedwig which is exposed and venerated on her feast day.

In 1992, in preparation for the church's 125th Anniversary, the interior underwent major renovation. After many layers of old paint had been peeled and sandblasted off, new painting was undertaken, supervised by Fr. Antoni Poloniak, a Salvadorian priest/artist. The ceiling was done in blues, white and gold, representing heaven. On the wall behind the main altar, he painted angels singing "Ave Maria", Our Lady of Czestochowa with Pope John Paul II, and St. Hedwig. All of the altars were regilded, statues renovated and the Stations of the Cross re—painted. Additionally, a painting of the Merciful Jesus by Tomes Tederko was installed over the tabernacle. To complete the renovation, a new Entrance Plaza, paved with individually inscribed bricks purchased by parishioners was constructed.

The Jubilee Year opened with a Parish Mission on the feast of the Annunciation of the BVM, was celebrated in the spirit of gratitude, joy and faith. The Jubilee Mass, on June 19, 2005 was concelebrated by the Most Rev. Jose Gomez, Archbishop of San Antonio, Most Rev. Patrick Flores, Archbishop Emeritus, Most Rev. John Yanta, Bishop of Amarillo, Salvadorian Fathers, and many priests, religious sisters, and distinguished guests. Expressing gratitude to Parishioners for the enormous task of preparing this historical event which included also a picnic and parade, Rev. Boleslaw Zadora, SDS pastor, used this opportunity to introduce to guests the spiritual gifts of the Jubilee.

Counting the blessings of the ancestors whose faith and love of God still lives on in the beautiful church and cemetery when they left us, the Parishioners decided to leave a legacy of their own faith in the forms of the new Parish Center, a new cross at the entrance dedicated to Pope John Paul II, a sculpture of St. Isidore, patron of farming communities, and a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Blessed Mother of the Americas.

One of the final projects of the Jubilee Celebration was the restoration of the church's floor. During that time, the church pews were placed in the John Paul II Center for Sunday and daily services. A Brazilian teakwood floor was installed to harmonize with the beautiful style of the church and bring the assurance that its quality would last for a long time.

In closing the 150th Anniversary with the Thanksgiving Mass, Rev. Boleslaw Zadora, SDS Pastor, expressed the heartfelt gratitude to God, the Blessed Mother of the Annunciation, Patron Saints of the parish, and to members of our parish family. We witnessed many wonderful spiritual and physical accomplishments during this historical year. So many Parishioners came together in unexpected ways to manifest their faith, fulfill dreams for our parish and to perform miracles through their generous hearts. The fruits of these labors will only be fully realized between now and our next milestone. We can be sure that the spirit of the Jubilee Year will keep the momentum going forward to help the generations grow in faith and take good care of this beautiful church and parish.

The 20th Anniversary of the visit of Pope John Paul II to San Antonio, (September 13-14, 1987) was observed at the Annunciation of the BVM church in September with the thanksgiving Mass presided by Archbishop Jose H. Gomez and concelebrated by a number of religious and priests of the Archdiocese. Then, a special program dedicated to the Pope's visit was held in the Center where Msgr. Lawrence Stubben and other members of the coordinating team shared their memories of that historical visit. In his closing remarks, Archbishop Gomez put the Pope's life in beautiful perspective when he said: "His life spanned the biggest of tragedies and greatest of accomplishments of the modern world. He lived through the destruction of his nation, Nazi and Soviet mass murder, global nuclear stalemate, and yet he led millions across the world to see in the human person the image of God's beauty and love. He renewed the Church and never wavered in his deep love and devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary."

Saint Hedwig Our Patroness and Spiritual Mother

A Duchess of Poland, she was born in Andechs in Bavaria around 1174. She was an aunt to St. Elizabeth of Hungary. Her parents were Berthold and Agnes of Moravia. From childhood, she was remarkable for her self-control. At the age of twelve, she was given in marriage to Henry I, Duke of Silesia in Poland. She bore him seven children and made the family a model of religion according to the medieval pattern of prayers and penance. All her thoughts and actions were directed to please God and to sanctify her own soul and household. In order to more freely serve God, Hedwig persuaded her husband to make a vow of chastity, which they made in the presence of the bishop. Thirty years after the tragic death of her husband, she was inspired by God to take the Cistercian Habit at the monastery of Trzebnica, and lived in obedience to her daughter, Gertrude, who was then Abbess.

St. Hedwig was a model of the highest religious perfection. She undertook menial offices, and waited upon the poor. She founded a hospital to care for the poor and sick, and served as the mother of the unfortunates. Her patience and strength of soul were admirable. This was most conspicuous at the death of her son, Henry, Duke of Silesia, when he was killed in a battle against the Tartars who invaded Poland in 1241. She was noted for her miraculous power. She died on October 14, 1243 and was buried on October 16th. Shortly after her death, Pope Clement IV enrolled her among the Saints on March 26, 1267. She is honored as Patroness of Silesia, Poland, our St. Hewig Community and many other places where churches are dedicated in her name. St. Hedwig, whose feast we celebrate in October continues inspiring the faithful of all times by her faith and selfless involvement in the Church and in the world of her day. Today, it is these Christ-committed, consecrated ones that the world turns to for inspiration and the hope we need to persevere in our challenging times.

On St. Hedwig's feast day, October 16, 1987, Karol Wojtyla was elected Pope. He chose the name John Paul II and named her as the Patroness of his Papacy. Following his example, we continue to call on her spiritual help so we can make ourselves presentable to the Lord as they did. It gives us great confidence to be linked to these two great servants of God.