

## The Texas Connection in Polish Studies

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Polish Studies were introduced at the University of Texas at Austin in 1984 and have been maintained as an academic and institutional presence ever since. After some general comments about the role and goals of this program at our institution, I turn to a particular issue within that context: the curricular design of a survey course on Polish culture and the use of instructional technology to deliver that content.

1. It is true: the phrase 'Polish studies in Texas' has the flavor of an oxymoron about it. As if the ocean between the two continents were not enough of a metaphor for their differences, there is considerable land mass on either side of that ocean which contributes to the gap as well. Texas was an underpopulated land, explored and lightly colonized by the Spanish and French, but ultimately established as an autonomous political entity only in 1836 by an Anglo-Saxon lower class culture of drifters without pretences of High Culture. Within ten years the leaders of the Republic of Texas chose to be incorporated into a neighboring imperial power. Poland, on the other hand, has a continuous history of cultural continuity spilling over both ends of the second millennium, including royal dynasties, the Universal Church and a Latin-based culture, and the constant struggle throughout that period, sometimes in contradiction of itself, to define both a distinct nationality and a nation state. Its incorporation into neighboring imperial powers was never voluntary.

And yet the bonds are there. If Poland is an overwhelming Catholic country, almost a quarter of the population of Texas shares this faith (second only in the number of adherents to the Baptist church), and in areas where Mexican or other Hispanic communities predominate, so does the church of Rome and its ethos (in particular, the Marian cult). The mythologized pioneering spirit of Texas has its parallel in the politically pioneering spirit of Poland. Both savor a history of resistance to imposed authority, made explicit in the famous Tomasz Sarnecki poster challenging Poles to vote for Solidarity on that fateful day of 4 June 1989, just as Gary Cooper's Will Kane faced the challenge of his principles and duty in the 1952 film 'High Noon'. This history includes not only armed uprisings, but a mythic cult based on the martyrdom of failure ('Remember the Alamo' was the slogan of Texas' 'March uprising', which followed Poland's November uprising by only 6 years). Both have experienced sovereignty as a nation alternating with incorporation into larger, neighboring countries.<sup>1</sup> While numerically small, the community of Texas Silesians is recognized by the United States National Register of Historic Places as the oldest organized settlement of Poles in the United States. With its spiritual center in the Tri-city (*trójmiasto!*) of Panna Maria, Cestochowa, and Kosciuszko [sic] (and various outlyers), this Polish community and parish has survived intact for almost 150 years. While for much of this time the Texas Silesians were essentially a cultural island cut off from the ancestral homeland, there are now increasing contacts between the archdioceses of San Antonio and Opole, bringing

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<sup>1</sup>It is a numerological curiosity that both Poland and Texas have been incorporated into five neighboring powers. For Poland: Prussia, Austro-Hungary, Russia, Germany, and the Soviet Union; for Texas: Spain, France, Mexico, the Confederacy, and the United States. Obviously the circumstances of 'incorporation' were vastly different in the two cases. It is an irony of history that Texas, with less of an autonomous identity than Poland, enjoyed more control over its destiny.

priests and nuns to Texas both to administer to the spiritual needs of the community and to staff nursing homes.

As a state institution of higher education, the mission of the University of Texas at Austin includes service to the community which supports it. A well-organized and numerous 'Czech' community (more precisely, Moravian) raised over a million dollars to endow a professorship, the Texas Chair of Czech Studies. The smaller and rural community of Texas Silesians is in no position to match this deed, and yet it is important that their historical and current presence be recognized and promoted by our program. Moreover, it is accepted that students with an identifiable ethnic or cultural heritage should have the opportunity to enrich that heritage, via language and culture courses (as appropriate), and Polish studies courses serve that constituency as well.<sup>2</sup>

But clearly it would trivialize area studies to reduce them to maintaining ethnic self-awareness. A large research institution like the University of Texas includes faculty expertise and research facilities in social and humanistic disciplines such as history, sociology, economics, political science, literature, folklore and linguistics. A country of almost 40 million people with a rich history of often wrenching transitions and experiments has much to offer both scholars and students in these disciplines. Our institution has a federally-funded Center for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies to foster interdisciplinary research and study in the region, and the Lyndon Johnson School of Public Affairs has on-going exchange programs with several institutions in Poland (Politechnika Krakowska and Krajowa Szkoła Administracji Publicznej in Warsaw). It is a fact of the internal sociology of academe that those with a primary commitment to an area or culture sit in an often uneasy symbiotic relation with those whose primary commitment is to a discipline. The relation should be a rich one of cross-fertilization and cooperation, and it often is, but energy must be invested in maintaining the relationship. As a member of the former group, I accept the obligation of 'promoting' an interest in Poland among those with more disciplinary commitments.

Finally, there is the issue of study abroad, or, more broadly, 'in-country experience'. It is a truism that the opportunity to pursue language and culture studies in the country of study is both an effective means to an end and a reward for one's efforts. But as important as the content of the study and residence-abroad experience is, it is no less important as a skill for learning how to function in an alien land and culture, how to deal with linguistic and cultural limitations, and how to prevent those limitations from fostering alienation. And experience teaches that grammatical, lexical, and cultural errors are rarely irreparable, while insensitivity, indifference, and arrogance often are. Moreover, the very fact that one has made the effort to submit oneself to another language and culture is almost invariably appreciated and overrides inevitable errors of detail.

2. In addition to Polish language courses, I regularly offer a survey in English of Polish political, social, and cultural history. This course, entitled *The Polish Experience*, has had an average enrollment of fifteen students. The course has two goals. The first, which could be characterized as content-oriented, aims at developing a 'cultural literacy' with respect to Poland and is

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<sup>2</sup>It is a very difficult matter to quantify the contemporary Polish demographic presence in Texas (as elsewhere) because of varying degrees of assimilation. One source reports that in 1990 there were 237,557 Texans of Polish descent (*The Online Handbook of Texas*. Austin: Texas State Historical Society, 1997-2000). While origin of this strikingly precise figure is not indicated, it is probably based on the reported 'ancestry' question in the 1990 federal census. It follows that in 1990 approximately 1.2% of the Texas population reported Polish ancestry, in contrast to the nationwide figure of approximately 2.5% (6 out of 240 million). The corresponding data from the 2000 census is not yet available.

designed to enhance multi-cultural, global perspectives on the part of students physically, culturally, and experientially isolated from Poland and its European context. The second goal, more discipline-oriented, aims to introduce the modes of thought and analysis which characterize such cultural and humanistic fields as literature, history, sociology, anthropology, music, etc. Each goal in its own way is embedded in the philosophy of the liberal education which an American university aims to provide its students.

In teaching this course, I have utilized the World Wide Web to deliver media resources. The original impetus for doing so was a student concern that I would show paintings or photographs and play audio and video clips in class which would not be accessible for review or study outside of class. It is a powerful advantage of computer-based materials that they are truly multi-media; that is, images, audio, and video can be stored and then displayed without any special effort on the user's part beyond a click of the mouse. The Web adds the advantages of accessibility from virtually anywhere in the world, flexibility (in organization, presentation, and modification), and an increasingly wide range of ready content. These various media can be coordinated with each other, so that, for example, a student can view the Jasna Góra monastery in Czestochowa, read its history, hear the chimes, and step inside to see the Black Madonna icon. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly possible to bring the advantages of computer-based and web-based materials to the classroom itself, thereby addressing the problem of physically juggling books, maps, a video cassette player and/or a CD player, while writing on the blackboard and all the while expecting students to take notes or otherwise retain what is presented. Portable media projectors are now available to display the video output of, say, a laptop computer onto a large screen easily visible to an entire class. Thus, one can prepare an outline of the class material with links for the media displays, such that in class the instructor can proceed through the outline by clicking at sequential points to display an image or play a video clip or audio track. The multimedia capabilities of the delivery medium permits, in contemporary parlance, a 'seamless' presentation.<sup>3</sup>

I have developed a web site dedicated to this 'Polish Experience' course within a larger site entitled 'Polish Studies at the University of Texas at Austin'.<sup>4</sup> I highlight here three aspects of this course I have found to be particularly well-served by Web-based multi-media presentation.

First, because this is an interdisciplinary survey course, there is little time to read lengthy literary texts or listen to operas; at the other extreme, a list of names and references to trends and influences can be completely sterile. I have moved from general survey overview lectures driven by chronology to more focused lectures in which general themes arise in illustration. For example, topical lectures devoted to Wiesława Szymborska or Henryk Górecki have replaced thematic survey lectures such as 'Contemporary Polish poetry' or 'Contemporary Music'. A web site can include brief texts in Polish and English, and audio or video clips (for example, readings of poetry, excerpts from musical works). Moreover, existing information on the Web can be taken advantage of by including links to already-existing images and audio or video clips, including 'samples' at internet retailers and other sites, sometimes commercial (e.g., web pages in Poland promoting the movies *Pan Tadeusz* and *Ogniem i Mieczem*) and sometimes merely someone's labor of love.

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<sup>3</sup>While these remarks are focused on the use of the Web, there are also commercial CD ROM-based materials which can be used in classroom presentations using the same hardware set-up. For example, on a recent trip to Poland I purchased *Wirtualna rekonstrukcja Krakowa: Okres romanski* (Cracow: MM Interactive, 2000), which has fascinated those who have seen it, with simulated flight over the Cracow area reconstructed from the tenth through twelfth century and interiors of the main buildings.

<sup>4</sup>The URL of the site is <<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sla323/>>

Second, I have found it useful to develop what I call 'virtual city tours' of Cracow and Warsaw by utilizing the same mix of locally-developed multi-media materials and links to existing sites. For example, my web site includes maps of the city and links to sites including images of historically and architecturally-significant monuments, sponsored by the corresponding cities or organizations in those cities (sometimes commercial, sometimes cultural). There are technological limitations, as several documentary films I show in class which simulate a tour of the city are too long to post on the Web, but still images can recall a stroll in Cracow, say, around the Main Market Square and on to Wawel.

Third, for some time I have been developing a project entitled 'Songs and Melodies of Polish History'. The idea is that there is a set of songs and melodies (e.g., the Cracow 'Hejnal', 'Bogurodzica', the national anthem Dabrowski's Mazurka, Jan Pietrzak's 'Zeby Polska byla Polska') which are part of the cultural knowledge of every moderately cultured Pole. This project has been on my mind for some time, and has entailed a) identifying the songs/melodies, b) finding the texts and historical commentary, and c) collecting recordings. My earlier goal was to compile a booklet of texts and commentary to accompany a cassette tape of recordings. It is now a simple matter to 'burn' or create a CD, which is much more practical than a cassette in terms of making individual tracks accessible. But the Web opens up even more possibilities. In the course web site these historical songs are integrated into the flow of instruction, alongside other information and media materials relating to the historical period in question. On the other hand, this resource is of potential interest to a wider range of people outside the context of the course. The flexibility of the Web makes it possible to take advantage of its universal accessibility: it was a simple matter to add a single page with links to the songs and melodies scattered over the course site. Thus, the same content can be easily packaged in different ways, to address different needs and audiences.

Obviously considerable preparation time is required for these purposes, but what is invested is not wasted, since such material can not only be reused, but easily updated, expanded, and modified (more so than can handouts; and reassembling albums and cassettes every year is itself a chore). It must be granted that the demands on technological resources are considerable, but they are by no means out of reach of an American university department. In addition to a laptop with appropriate hardware and software, course preparation requires a scanner, CD/cassette player, and VCR, and class presentation requires a room with an internet connection (LAN or phone line) and a media projector. The Web entails a tradeoff between access and speed (with a LAN reducing the tension between the two). If a room with internet connection is not available or if a phone line is too slow to be practical, one could rely on the laptop itself to provide the storage, although it would be necessary to download considerable information in advance in order to duplicate what has already been made available on the Web.

3. Americans have a reputation for insufficient knowledge of, indeed, interest in, other languages, lands, and cultures, and this reputation is not completely undeserved. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that geography still matters, even in the global village. Yes, more Americans should be more fluent in Spanish and French, and more should be knowledgeable about our neighbors Canada and Mexico, but is our record so much worse that that of Germans

vis-a-vis Poland?<sup>5</sup> Knowledge elsewhere in the world of English and of the largest economy, military power, and purveyor/exporter of popular culture is not comparable to knowledge of, say, Poland (or, for that matter, of Brazil, the second-most populous nation in the Americas, more populous than Russia, and twice the population of Germany). Correspondingly, the challenges faced by those of us in Polish studies are different. We need to generate interest in our subject as well as teach it. University administrations (including our own here in Texas) generally recognize this and do not reduce the matter to an investment formula deriving short-term cost effectiveness, but market forces present an irresistible logic in the long term. Those of us in Polish Studies in the United States have to accept the need to make Poland, its land, people, and culture real, immediate, and interesting as part of our educational responsibilities. It is a field with a natural and legitimate place at our universities, justified by both our mission and philosophy. I have described here one means of contributing toward this end.

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<sup>5</sup> Even this analogy is unfair to Americans. Poland is almost one-half the population of Germany, while Mexico is about one-third of the much larger population of the United States. Whatever the image of Poland's cultural and economic level might be in Germany, the asymmetry between Mexico and the United States in wealth and power is far greater.