

“Remember the past, preserve the
serenity of your spirit and repeat
the song of our fathers: for Poland
will not perish as long as we live”

Joachim Lelewel
(1786-1861)

Polish Historian
(An address to Polish Youth 1844)

POLISH SOCIETY OF CALIFORNIA

1863.

I

The history of the Polish people's settlement in San Francisco and California is closely related to the November Uprising of 1830-31 in Poland. As a result of this Uprising many Poles emigrated to the United States and to this area.

One of the first settlers was Major Stanislaw Pongowski, a former aide-de-camp to General Wincenty Kransinski. Major Pongowski left Poland after the November Uprising; he spent some time traveling around the world and then came to California in 1843. Little is known about his stay in California except that it was brief, for a short time later he moved to Chile, where he became a prominent citizen.

Another early California pioneer was Wojciech Pulaski (sometimes spelled Polasky). Pulaski came to California in 1846 and subsequently Marcus Pulaski founded the town of Pollasky on the River San Joaquin in Fresno County. He is also credited with establishing the first railroad between Fresno and Friant, The Southern Pacific Railroad line joining Fresno, Clovis and Friant is still known as the Pollasky Road.

One of the most well known Polish pioneers is Dr. Feliks Pawel Wierzbicki who arrived in California with Colonel J. D. Stevenson's regiment from New York in 1847. Dr. Wierzbicki was the author of the first English book printed west of the Rockies; *California as it is and as it May be, or A Guide to the Gold Region*. The first edition of this book appeared in San Francisco on September 30, 1849. It was printed in the shop of Washington Bartlett, a future mayor of San Francisco. The book was bound in a paperback and sewn together with ordinary thread. It was sixty pages long at first printing but in 1849 two more chapters were added making the second edition seventy-six pages. Dr. Wierzbicki is also known for his articles on the history of medicine which have been published in *The California State Journal of Medicine*. The first of these articles appeared under the title of Essay on the History of Medicine, (vol. 1, 1856, p. 147).



Dr. Wierzbicki died on December 26, 1860, at the age of forty-five. He was buried in the Laurel Hill Cemetery. About ten years ago, through the efforts of the Polish American Citizen's Club, San Francisco, his grave was moved to the cemetery at the Presidio of San Francisco.

The greatest number of Poles coming into California was recorded during the Gold Rush period. Aleksander Zakrzewski, an officer of the Polish Army of 1831, is one of the men who settled in California during that period. Zakrzewski drew up the first plan of the City of San Francisco in 1849. The map is entitled; Official Map of San Francisco, completed from the field notes of the official re-survey made by Wm. M. Eddy, C. E. surveyor of the town of San Francisco, drawn by Alexander Zakrzewski, ex-Polish Officer, 1849. The map is now in the keeping of Oregon City, Clackamas County, Oregon.

Another man who came to San Francisco at the time is Rudolf Piotrowski. Piotrowski founded the Polish Committee in 1863, the first Polish organization in the area.

In 1853, Kazimierz Bielawski, a former captain of the Austrian Army, settled in San Francisco. Captain Bielawski was one of the principal organizers, leaders, and the first president of the Polish Society of California. He worked for the United States Land Office for 45 years and was generally recognized as the most informed person in his field. In commemoration of his services a mountain near Los Gatos in Santa Clara County was given his name, Mt. Bielawski. Bielawski died in San Francisco on March 3, 1905 and was buried in Cypress Lawn Memorial Park, Colma (lot 69, div. 3, sec. C). A monument was placed on his grave in 1937 through the efforts of the Polish Society of California. Helena Modrzejewska (Modjeska) mentions Bielawski in her memoirs; "He was thoroughly honest; it would have been easy for him to have accumulated a large fortune, but he was unusually scrupulous and never exploited for his own gain the possibilities which his government position gave him." (Memoirs and Impressions of Helena Modjeska, New York, 1910, pp 305-308).



Kazimierz Bielawski,
First President of the Polish
Society of California

Other Poles, equally prominent, who settled in San Francisco were: Wincenty Lutnicki, Dr. Jan Srenzel, Franciszek Wojciechowski, Aleksander Bednawski, Julian W. Andrzejowski, Captain Theophilus Leasen, General Włodzimierz Krzyżanowski (a hero of the American Civil War for whom a monument was erected in Arlington National Cemetery, in Washington, D.C.), Dr. Pawłicki, an insurrectionist of 1863, Dr. Teclaw, Krystyna Narbutowna, and many others.

Another Polish name which deserves mention is Stanisław (Stanislaus). "Besides the river, there are mountains, a peak (Alpine County), a town (Tuolumne County), and a county which bear the name of Stanislaus. They were so named after Stanislaus, or Estanislao, an Indian of the Walla-Walla tribe, who led uprisings against Mexican authorities in the first half of this century" (Mieczysław Haiman, Polish pioneers of California, Chicago, Ill., Polish R. C. Union of America, 1940, p. 37). Father F. Bolek in his work, *Settlements established by Poles in the United States*, convinces us by documentation that the name is definitely of Polish origin. (*Polski Przegląd Kartograficzny* - Polish Cartographic Review - no. 32, 1930, p. 2).

II

The first social organization in San Francisco was the Polish Committee whose initial undertaking was the collection of funds to support the struggle for Polish independence on the continent. They were able to collect what in those days was a substantial sum, \$8,000. The most active members of this Committee in 1863 were: Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski, C. Meyer, Julian W. Andrzejewski, Dr. J. L. Czappkay (a Hungarian closely identified with the Polish cause) and Kazimierz Bielawski.

Bielawski acted as chairman of the Committee and Andrzejewski its secretary. In May, 1864, C. Meyer was nominated as Political Agent in California by the Polish Insurrectionist National Government. This action aroused the enthusiasm of the Polish community and gave them the incentive to continue working for the Polish cause. The Committee later changed its name to The Polish Society of California. In 1880 the Society joined the Polish National Alliance of the United States and received the designation of Group four. This was subsequently changed to its present designation of Group seven. In 1894 the Society was reorganized and a fraternal insurance plan for members was introduced which is still in effect today.

At this same time a new organization was created in San Francisco called, "Towarzystwo Bratniej Pomocy - Zjednoczenie Rzymsko-Katolickie (Benevolent Society of the Polish Roman Catholic Union)" under the name of St. Stanislaus which is still very active today. Both groups were very active; they raised funds which they deposited in the local banks and when Poland gained its independence the money was invested in Polish government bonds. Also, the Polish Society of California established a Polish library which today numbers over 3,000 volumes.

The members of the colony were fairly close knit groups, especially the political exiles. We get some insight into the lives of these pioneers through the works of Henryk Sienkiewicz and Helena Modrzejewska. An example is Sienkiewicz's "*Przemysłowca*" who, isolated in the wilderness, nourished a yearning for his homeland by reading his uncle's Bible so as "not to forget his language."

In her memoirs Helena Modrzejewska recalls that when she came to San Francisco in 1876 to settle on a farm with Henryk Sienkiewicz, Sypniewski and Paprocki, she was met by a group of local Poles. At the head of the group was Captain Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski and with him Captain K. Bielawski, Dr. Pawlicki, General Włodzimierz Krzyzanowski, Horain, Bednarski, and Captain Theophilus Lessen. This group helped her get on the American stage in California and introduce the Polish name to the American public.

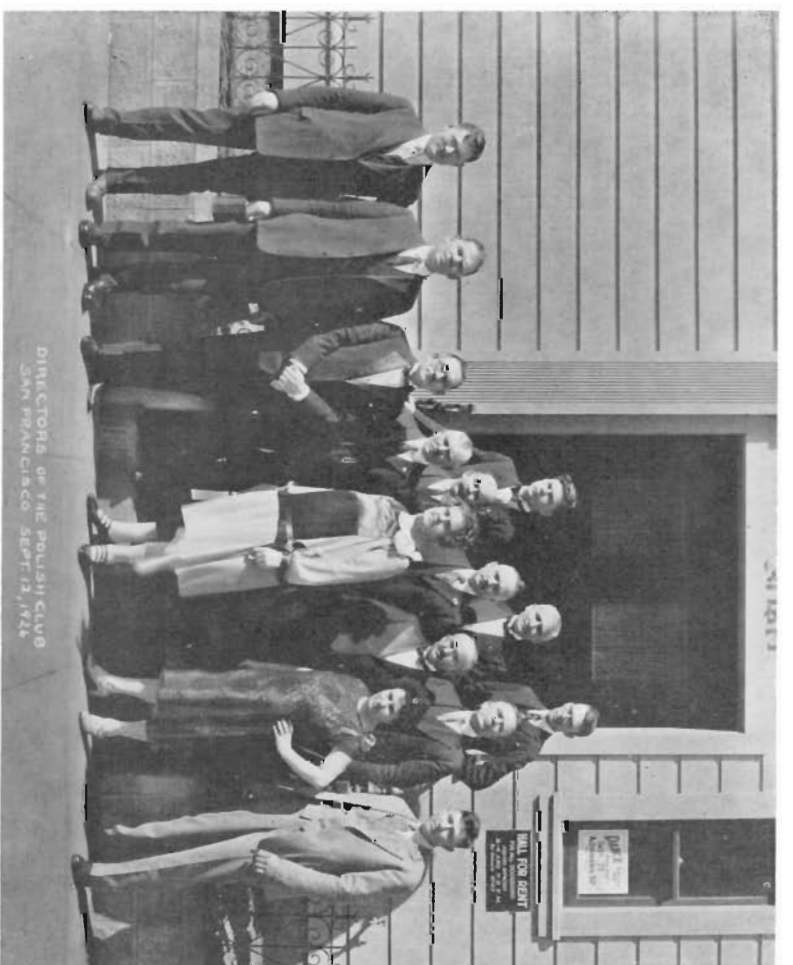
The period prior to World War I brought consolidation and further organizational growth of the Polish community in San Francisco. An "Eagle's Aerie" as well as a "Polish Society" in Oakland came into being. A courageous, dedicated Polish priest, Father Jan Kanty Rosmus raised several thousand dollars for a parish church. Following his premature death the money was used for the purchase of a Polish Home in San Francisco.

III

The most active workers in the Polish Organizations after World War I were Stanislaw A. Blonski, Pawel Brzuza, Felix Gottlicher, Henryk Pratkiewicz, Lucyan Markiewicz, F. Potasz, Florian and Josefa Niklasiewicz. Later Michael Maslach, Katarzyna Pich, Albina Isacff, and Victor Wielgosz arrived.

After Poland obtained its independence the Polish community in San Francisco collected funds which they sent to the "Old Country." This was a way of helping the country of their origin.

The year 1926 was a turning point in the life of the Polish organizations in San Francisco. The Polish community established its own "Home" at 3040 Twenty-



DIRECTORS OF THE POLISH CLUB
San Francisco, Sept. 12, 1926

Bottom row, from left to right: Franciszek Potasz, Adolf Strzelecki, Otto G. Kuklinski, attorney at law, Leon Kowalkowski, Katarzyna Pich, Pawel Brzuza, Josefa Niklasiewicz, Jan Luczynski. Second row: Jan Klich, Felix Gottlicher, Dyczynski. Third row: Teofil Kot, Stanislaw Blonski, Felix Majeranowski.

second Street. With the home as its focal point the Polish community was very active. Under the direction of Mrs. Josefa Niklasiewicz, a Literary-Drama Society was organized which presented theatrical productions on its own stage and arranged for folk dances and the celebrations of the national holidays. Pageants were organized and there was cooperation with other national groups. The Polish community took an active role in the construction and the opening ceremonies of San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. It was under the active guidance of Dr. Ralph Modjeski that most of the plans for that outstanding structure were drawn, for he was appointed Chairman of the Board of Consulting Engineers for the projection of the bridge. Articles with Polish themes were frequently seen in the papers.

Receptions were given for prominent Polish artists who came to California. No Polish artist of note failed to visit San Francisco. Among these artists were: Helena