

Polish Historic Sites in Northern California -- San Francisco and Environs

Facts and Figures | Things to See

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Feliks Paweł (Felix Paul) Wierzbicki, M.D., is among the most prominent of the Polish pioneers in northern California. Wierzbicki's book (*California As It Is, And As It May Be, or A GUIDE TO THE GOLD REGION*) was published in San Francisco in 1849 (free to read online). Dr. Wierzbicki is memorialized in a mural on the history of medicine located in **Toland Hall at the University of California, San Francisco** Medical Center. **Toland Hall** is open to the public when not in use for scheduled lectures [NOTE: The mural, designed by Polish-Jewish artist, Bernard Zakheim, may be demolished due to construction of a new building]. The hall is located on the first floor, U-142 at 533 Parnassus Avenue, San Francisco. Dr. Wierzbicki's headstone (he died in 1860) can be found at **San Francisco's National Cemetery** in the Presidio (1 Lincoln Blvd., Section OS, Row 58, Site 2). It is reported to be **the oldest preserved Polish tombstone on the West Coast of the United States**. It was restored in 1996 by the Polish Combatant's Circle #49.

Jan (John) Strentzel, M.D., the father-in-law of naturalist John Muir, was a renowned horticulturalist, vintner, and scholar. He was proprietor of the Alhambra vineyard, near Martinez, Contra Costa County, where he cultivated 45 varieties of grapes as well as pomegranates, almonds, and more. His house is open to the public at the **John Muir National Historic Site** (4202 Alhambra Avenue, Martinez, CA) where **visitors can view the certificate he was awarded in 1880** on the 50th anniversary of the **November Uprising**, marking his participation in this patriotic struggle to liberate partitioned Poland in 1830.

Captain Kazimierz (Casimir) Bielawski and Captain Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski co-founded the Polish Society of California (in San Francisco) in 1863 that, at that outset, planned a "Grand Mass Meeting in Favor of Polish Freedom and Nationality" on the 22nd of May at Platt's Music Hall (the site of today's **Mill's Building, 200 Montgomery Street, San Francisco**). Bielawski had a distinguished 45-year career as a civil engineer, draughtsman and cartographer for the Surveyor's Office in San Francisco. In 1861 a **3,269-foot mountain near Highway 101 in Santa Clara County** was named for Bielawski. He authored a topographical and railroad map of central California and Nevada that was published in 1865. His headstone, erected by the Polish Society of California, can be viewed at **Cypress Lawn Memorial Park** in Colma, CA (Section C, Division 3, Lot 69, Grave 11). Bielawski befriended world-renowned stage actress, **Helena Modjeska**, as did Society co-founder...

Captain Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski -- reputed to have saved Helena Modjeska's career.

Piotrowski (**Henryk Sienkiewicz's** prototype for **Zagłoba**), and his compatriots, Dr. Strentzel and **Aleksander Bednawski**, were veterans of the 1830-31 Uprising. Piotrowski arrived in California via the overland route from Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh Enterprise Company) in 1849. With his fellow veteran, **Franciszek Michał Wojciechowski** (Francis Mitchel), Piotrowski purchased property in the former mining town of Sebastopol in **Sacramento County on the Cosumnes River** (near today's **Sloughhouse**). Together they ran a gold country camp store, served as election officers, and entertained Henryk Sienkiewicz. Wojciechowski was Sienkiewicz's model for **Longinus Podbięta**.

In San Francisco, where Piotrowski ultimately settled, the Polish Society held regular meetings at the Russ House (today the site of the **Russ Building, 235 Montgomery Street**). Piotrowski was appointed Commissioner of Immigration during his long residence in San Francisco. He is buried in France where he sought help for failing eyesight. **Wojciechowski** is buried in **Sacramento's Old City Cemetery** (B,128,43) with his brother Antoni. He has no headstone, though his brother has one.

The home of the Polish Society of California, at **3040 22nd Street** in San Francisco's Mission District, is the **Polish Club**. Though the Club is regularly let to various nonprofit groups, some Polish events are routinely held there, and the Club retains remnants of the **Society's original library** (founded by Helena Modjeska). **Historic bookcases** may be viewed at the Polish Club's Library, by appointment. **Virtually all footsteps of historic Polonia in San Francisco were destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco Fire and Earthquake.**

Another Polish 49er and “master of engineering” was **Aleksander Zakrzewski**, an accomplished lithographer from Sandomierz who worked for the US Surveyor General’s Office. He drew one of the initial San Francisco street maps. He is also known for “a beautiful map of the mining region of California.” A replica of his SF “plat” may be viewed at the Polish Club’s Library, by appointment.

Władysław (Ladislaus) Pawlicki, M.D., friend of Helena Modjeska, was a prominent San Franciscan and long-time officer of the Polish Society of California. He was a veteran of the Crimean War and one of the original founders of the California Academy of Medicine. He arrived in San Francisco in 1863 on the Russian ship *Rynda*. Korwin Piotrowski was the godfather to one of Pawlicki’s sons. His headstone is at **Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery** (Section B, Row 14, Area 14, Grave 7).

Andrzej Poniatowski, the great-nephew of the last king of Poland, brought the first hydroelectric power lines to the Bay Area, established the Sierra Railroad Company, and formed the Standard Electric Co., now Pacific Gas & Electric. Helena Modjeska’s son, **Ralph Modjeski**, became one of America’s greatest bridge builders; he played a key role in early designs of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge.

Bay Area Poles assimilated into the mainstream of American society. Immigration waned during the early part of the 19th century, not to be resumed in significant numbers until after World War II.

Among the first post-war immigrants was **Stefan Norblin**. His Art Deco paintings in pre-war Poland and his wartime paintings in India have recently been rediscovered and celebrated in exhibitions and film; Norblin settled in San Francisco with his wife, the popular Polish actress, **Lena Żelichowska**.

Jan Henryk de Rosen (1891-1982), Polish patriot and painter, created murals and mosaic works. In San Francisco, samples of his work may be found at **Grace Cathedral** (1100 California Street), at the **Church of the Epiphany** (827 Vienna Street), and near San Francisco at **Holy Angels Church** (107 San Pedro Road, Colma).
https://web.archive.org/web/20021006121630/http://www.gracecathedral.org/enrichment/crypt/cry_19970919.shtml

At the **Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption** in San Francisco, known locally as **Saint Mary’s Cathedral** (1111 Gough Street) is found a reproduction of the icon of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa (gift from Wanda Tomczykowska), where St. John Paul II said Mass during a visit to San Francisco. Pani Tomczykowska is also credited for naming a **small plaza in North Beach** for Polish author Joseph Korzeniowski (i.e., Joseph Conrad).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Conrad_Square

At the **Magnes Museum** in Berkeley, there are works by **Artur Szyk and Max Wolff**.
The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life
2121 Allston Way
Berkeley, CA 94720-6300
<https://magnes.berkeley.edu/>

For more historical information about Poles in Northern California, see:
<http://www.polishclubsf.org/PolishSocietyOfCalifornia.htm>
<http://www.polishclubsf.org/FairmontSlides.pdf>
<http://www.polishclubsf.org/Newspapers.htm>

and, historical letters are listed here:
<http://www.polishclubsf.org/Letters%20translated%20from%20Polish.pdf>

Stanford University

Stanford University is a world-famous seat of learning and research. It has an outstanding collection of books and documents on Poland, Polish history, language, music, science, and culture.

Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace

The Witold S. Sworakowski Collection on Poland at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford, CA is a magnificent and unique collection of documents from recent Polish history. Named after the first curator of the Polish collection, the late Witold S. Sworakowski (1903-1979), it is the largest source of documentation on recent Polish history outside of Poland. The holdings include over 200 archival and manuscript collections, 50,000 volumes of books, and 3,000 titles of periodicals and newspapers relating to Polish history from the late 19th century until today. Within the collection, there are 500 boxes of documents from the Polish Foreign Ministry files for the years 1925-1945. There are 54 boxes of papers from the Polish Embassy in the Soviet Union during the war years, including many documents reflecting the search for the missing officers from the camps in Kozielsk, Ostaszków, and Starobielsk, and over 15,500 prisoners who were massacred on Stalin's orders in 1940. There are 100 boxes of documents from the Polish Armed Forces files in World War II, including the papers of General Władysław Anders and the Polish Second Corps. There are 272 boxes of papers given to the Hoover Institution by Leopold Labedz, an eminent Polish journalist. Jan Nowak's papers are deposited there. The vast majority of these documents are not catalogued, and are not readily available. Prearrangements are advised.

Major Polonian Organizations in the San Francisco, San Jose and Sacramento Areas

The Polish American Congress, Northern California Division

<http://www.pacnorcal.org/>

The Polish Society of California was formed in 1863 to support Polish sovereignty. Eighty-one years later the restoration of Poland as a truly free and democratic country was still a primary concern of Polish-Americans. In May 1944, more than 2,600 delegates from 26 states representing Polish-Americans from all walks of life gathered at a convention in Buffalo, NY, and declared: "we wish to come to the assistance of the Polish nation... we want... a democratic Poland..." This act represented most expressively nothing less than the realization, nationwide, of the original aim of the Polish Society of California - uniting the Polish-American community for action on behalf of Poland's independence.

The Northern California Division of the PAC strives to support and bring about change on both a national and local scale. Most recently, together with other PAC divisions, the NCD has been greatly active in the struggle to modernize the visa system to include Poland in the Visa Waiver Program. On a local level PAC strives to support local Polish organizations in all their endeavors. Most importantly Congress promotes sharing Poland's history, language, and culture with our children and Americans of Polish descent to preserve Poland's rich cultural heritage and ethnic identity. Among many, two important events stand out in which the PAC plays a leading role: the May 3rd Celebration of the Polish Constitution at the Music Concourse in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, and Poland's Independence Day observance on November 11th celebrated in San Francisco at the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord.

The Polish Club Inc., San Francisco

<http://www.PolishClubSF.org>

The Polish Club (Dom Polski) in San Francisco's Mission District (3040 22nd Street) boasts three member societies, which held their first joint meeting in 1925. The mission of the Polish Club is to serve as a center for the propagation of Polish culture, art, language and community. The Club building (a former Baptist Church) was acquired in 1926 and is used today for Polish cultural events. Łowiczanie Polish Folk Ensemble of San Francisco holds weekly dance classes at the Polish Club on Tuesday evenings.

The Polish Society of California / Polish National Alliance, Lodge 7

<http://www.polishclubsf.org/PolishSocietyOfCalifornia.htm>

Polish Literary and Dramatic Circle

<http://www.polishclubsf.org/LiteraryAndDramaticSociety.htm>

St. Stanislaus Benevolent Society

<http://www.polishclubsf.org/StStan.htm>

Polam Federal Credit Union

<http://www.polamfcu.com/>

From its humble beginnings in 1974 with \$52,000 in assets and one office, to well over \$57-million and four locations in Northern California and one in Connecticut, Polam Federal Credit Union has grown to not only compete with traditional banks but even to outperform them with personalized services, quality of products and dedication to members.

Over the past 39-years, Polam has prospered, never wavering from the core belief that members “are” the credit union; Polam’s purpose is to serve their needs. That very belief was the cornerstone upon which Polam was founded in 1974, and continues to this day.

Polam has always been cognizant of its foundation, the Slavic community, and thus invests in the fine organizations of the community, such as Polish scouts, churches, schools, cultural foundations and the performing arts. These organizations not only keep the Polish spirit alive in the community, but also offer an example to the community of what it means to be Polish, and Polam is a proud sponsor.

Mr. Zdzisław Zakrzewski, one of the founders of Polam, passed away at the age of 93. Mr. Zakrzewski and his wife Zofia (who continues to serve on the Board of Directors for Polam) were not only the driving force behind Polam’s success, but left a legacy for future generations to admire and follow.

Polish Parish, Church of the Nativity of Our Lord in San Francisco

<http://www.sfnativity.org/>

First dedicated in June of 1904, the Church of the Nativity of Our Lord at 240 Fell Street in San Francisco has been the gathering place for Slavic Catholics for more than a hundred years. The Archbishop established the parish of Church of the Nativity of Our Lord in 1903. The parish is one of the San Francisco Archdiocese's active ethnic parishes.

Polish Pastoral Center, Martinez

<http://polishpastoralcenter.org/>

The Polish Pastoral Center (PPC) in the Roman Catholic Church serves as an extension of the shepherding role of the Bishop of Oakland to the Polish community in the Bay Area. As a Polish immigrant community, the pastoral center preserves the uniqueness of the Catholic faith and enriches, and is enriched by, the local Church. The focus of the Polish Pastoral Center is spiritual and social-cultural outreach to Polish people and Americans of Polish origin. This religious organization seeks ways and means to strengthen Polish culture and faith and to preserve tradition in concert with the vision of the Diocese of Oakland.

St. Brother Albert Pastoral Mission, San Jose

<http://www.saintalbert.us/index.php/us/>

The Society of Christ serves communities of Polish immigrants and their descendants around the world, including parishioners at St. Brother Albert Church, established in 1986. The Mission is named for St. Albert Chmielowski, a Polish

saint canonized in 1989 by Pope John Paul II. The Mission serves Polish Catholics in the San Jose area. Parishioners organize an annual Polish festival in September.

Our Lady of Częstochowa Chapel, Sacramento

<http://www.poloniasacramento.com/>

The Polonian Cultural and Pastoral Center in Sacramento was formally established in October 1985. The Center opened in 1991 and the Chapel of **Our Lady of Częstochowa** was consecrated by the Bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento that year. The Polonian Cultural and Pastoral Center serves Polish Catholics in the Sacramento area. The original members were Polish immigrants who had been activists in Poland's Solidarity movement. The Center organizes many events throughout the year such as picnics, entertainment, dancing, dinners and other social gatherings. The Center supports the local chapter of Polish Scouts and offers Polish language classes for children.

Polish Scouting

The Polish Scouting Association (**Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego, ZHP**) is a coeducational organization founded in 1918. Bay Area Polish scout troops are very active, fostering civic and moral values and preserving Polish traditions. Polish Scouting in exile was established in many Western countries after WWII by Polish political refugees. Scout leaders endeavored to instill the international scouting motto of service to God and country in succeeding generations of youth of Polish descent throughout the world.

John Paul II School of Polish Language

Polish-American Educational Committee of San Francisco, Inc.

<http://polishschool.org/home.html>

The John Paul II School of Polish Language was established over 40 years ago by the Polish-American Educational Committee of San Francisco to teach children the language and culture of Poland. Students learn Polish grammar and orthography, become acquainted with classical Polish literature, and study Polish history and geography. They also have the option to attend catechism classes. Students are enriched by their ability to speak in more than one language, and by contact with Poland's centuries-old Slavic culture. The JPII School of Polish Language also offers language classes for adults.

Łowiczanie Polish Folk Ensemble of San Francisco

<http://www.polishfolk.org>

Łowiczanie Polish Folk Ensemble of San Francisco is a group of skilled and dedicated dancers, singers and musicians, led by professionally-certified instructors, who present traditional music, song and dance from Poland's historic territory and diverse peoples. The Ensemble presents vibrant professional-quality programs for concerts, festivals, school programs, and special public and private events.

Membership is open to all interested persons for Tuesday-night "próba" (practice) at the Polish Club, 3040 22nd Street in San Francisco.

East Bay Polish American Association

<http://www.mjakmartinez.com/>

The East Bay Polish American Association, headquartered in Martinez, was established in 1987 for "church support to Polish-Americans." **Our Lady of Immigrants Chapel** is an important center for Polish immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area. Deacon Cichoń and Jesuit priests minister to the spiritual needs of parishioners. The Association sponsors an annual "Street Festival" in Martinez and organizes other Polish cultural events and fundraisers.

Polish Veterans Groups

Polish Combatants' Association (SPK) & Armia Krajowa (AK) Veterans

Veterans groups play a vital role in the Polish community, promoting patriotism and preserving Polish traditions. Veterans groups are both social and philanthropic. Members of the veterans' associations are former soldiers of the Polish Armed Forces who fought alongside the Allies during World War II.

Polish Club of Greater Sacramento (Roseville)

<http://www.polish-club.org/>

The Polish American Club of Greater Sacramento was founded in 1959 and incorporated in 1961. The Club promotes Polish heritage and offers Polish lessons for children, organizes dinners and celebrations, including Christmas and Easter Dinners, presents classical music concerts, maintains a library with Polish and English books, and features an annual Polish Festival in September. In 1974, Club members helped establish a credit union for the Polish American community of Northern California. **PolAm Federal Credit Union**, as it is known today, has assets in excess of \$60 million with an office in Sacramento and other Northern California communities, serving people of Polish descent and all others. From 1982 to 1985 the Club assisted with the resettlement of approximately 100 Polish refugee families in the Sacramento area. In 1987 the old Roseville community hall was purchased and became the club house. The club has remained strong and vibrant throughout the years, preserving the customs and culture of Poland in the Greater Sacramento area.

The Polish Arts and Culture Foundation

<http://www.polishculturesf.org/>

The Polish Arts and Culture Foundation was established in 1966 by Wanda Tomczykowska to introduce the wealth of Polish art and culture to Americans. Today, the Foundation is run by Caria Tomczykowska who follows in the footsteps of her mother, tirelessly promoting the best of Polish art and culture in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Foundation's Silver Anniversary was celebrated in 1991, the year that Poland, after years of struggle, realized full restoration of a democratic government. Throughout the years, the Foundation has shared with Americans the wealth of Polish history and cultural achievements. The Foundation is supported entirely by individual and corporate contributions. The Foundation is a nonprofit, nonsectarian organization. The Foundation recognizes that art and culture are timeless treasures to be shared by all people, and that these provide important avenues to universal dialogue and mutual understanding. See Facebook page or contact Caria Tomczykowska: 510.599.2244

Polish-American Engineers Club

<http://www.paecsv.org/>

The Polish-American Engineers Club is a non-profit organization in Silicon Valley that gathers together people from the fields of technology, science, and engineering for lectures and social functions. The goals of the PAEC are: maintaining professional and social relationships; facilitating the exchange of professional experience, and organizing presentations and seminars about technology, business and current social issues; assisting Polish organizations, scholars, and entrepreneurs seeking and developing business in Silicon Valley; helping organize the **Top 500 Innovators program** and other events in cooperation with the **US-Polish Trade Council**; helping with employment issues and life situations; and organizing social events and outings. The PAEC is one of four member organizations of the Council of Polish Engineers in North America. PAEC members co-organize the annual **Poland-Silicon Valley Science and Technology Symposium**.

San Francisco-Kraków Sister Cities Association

www.sfkrakow.org

Mayor Jacek Majchrowski signed a Sister Cities Agreement with local Honorary Consuls of Poland in the San Francisco Bay Area, signing on behalf of Mayor Gavin Newsom on July 2, 2009. Aimed at developing and strengthening contacts between the two cities, the agreement encourages cooperation in city management, business development, tourism, as well as

educational and cultural exchanges. The Sister Cities Association welcomes volunteers and members to organize and promote educational and cultural exchanges between the beautiful cities of San Francisco and Kraków.

New Polonia

New Polonia is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserve Polish traditions, culture and heritage, as well as to promote Polish people and businesses through various types of events, meetups, and media. The goal is to make the Polish community stronger and more recognized in the San Francisco Bay Area by being a source of information about the Polish community and its legacy, as well as providing support to our members, and those in need. The group aims to balance traditional and modern Polish culture to unite Polish immigrants and people of Polish descent of all generations, professions, and political persuasions.

New Polonia's goal is to revolutionize the view of Polish culture by educating, inspiring, promoting, and mobilizing the Polish community to modernize the popular view of Poland, and to promote people and organizations with Polish backgrounds in the USA and Poland.

Other

The Tadeusz Ungar Foundation

The Tadeusz Ungar Foundation is a charitable organization founded by Zdzisław Zakrzewski. The Foundation has given thousands of dollars to support Polish and Polonian causes, including helping the needy in the USA and Poland.

San Francisco Polskis

SF Polskis is a group (one of several "**Polski**" groups) created so that men and women in their 20s-40s who are Polish or have an interest in Poland and who live in the San Francisco Bay Area can socialize. The purpose of the group is to help members find friends and acquaintances through social, recreational, and cultural events and also to share information about other events in the local Polish community. *SF Polskis* meet for "happy hour", dances, hikes, volleyball, and more. Happy Hours are held on the 1st or 2nd Friday of the month in the evenings. Announcements may be found on Facebook.

There are many other Polish groups and philanthropic associations (such as several **Friends of John Paul II Foundations**) that have formed over the years in the San Francisco Bay Area. Polish soccer clubs and the Yacht Club of Poland are among them. In addition there are **Polish web portals**, newspapers and **newsletters** (e.g., the volunteer-run *Nasza Gazetka* by Gabriel Michta) that inform Bay Area Polonia about "things Polish."