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PROCESSES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG DESCENDANTS OF IMMIGRANTS. THE CASE OF THE COMMUNITIES OF BUENOS AIRES AND THE MISIONES PROVINCE (ARGENTINA)1

Abstract:
Polish community in Argentina – along with the community in Brazil – is one of the most numerous Polish-origin communities in Latin America. Seventy years have passed since the migratory processes between Poland and Argentina practically came to a halt, and the temporal distance since the arrival of the last group of Poles to this country is now reflected in the gradual and inevitable disappearance of the majority of these immigrants. Today, their adult descendants, who were born (many in exogamic families), raised and educated in Argentina, continue with a variety of activities that attempt, in one way or another, to keep the Polish culture alive. These activities, however, do not take shape in a vacuum or independently from the context surrounding particular groups; on the contrary, they are constructed in constant interaction with the receiving society and with the rest of the groups. In this article, based on the specific case of the Polish community in Buenos Aires and in the Misiones Province (Argentina), we intend to analyze the particularities of ethnic identity and of the ethnicity that the members of these communities preserve.

Keywords: Descendants of Immigrants, Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Markers, Poles in Argentina.

The establishment and, above all, the persistence in time of ethnic frontiers between different groups involves the existence of certain elements, also referred to as identity markers, that allow the group members to maintain the sense of belonging and the sense of otherness. In the case of settled communities with immigrant origins, consisting mainly of the immigrants’ descendants, these markers rarely remain immune to changes and transformations in the surroundings of the community. Usually, with the passage of time they tend to become, to a greater or lesser de-

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gree, subject to modifications. This is the case of the Polish community in Argentina and of the ethnicity that they preserve. For this reason, in this text, after outlining how the migratory movements between the two countries were shaped, we propose to focus on the elements around which the members of Polish community in Buenos Aires and the Misiones Province construct their ethnic identity today and to indicate, which characteristics they perceive to be exclusive to the group to which they belong.

Migratory Movements between Poland and Argentina

The initial phase of large-scale migratory movements to Argentina corresponds with the period when Poland was divided among its neighboring powers (Russia, Prussia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire), thus becoming a country that did not exist on the world map. During this period, the majority of migrants were peasants escaping extremely precarious situation in Polish rural areas; they were attracted by the benefits that Argentinian authorities offered to new arrivals. This group initially settled in the city of Apóstoles, in the Misiones Province in northeastern Argentina. The first immigrants in the region were granted property of parcels, which covered from 25 to 100 hectares, and obtained substantial aid in the form of tools, seeds, and provisions. The correspondence sent to families and neighbors in Poland, describing the received benefits, produced a strong migratory chain. As a result, after a few years, one of the most compact and populous Polish centers in all of Latin America was established in Misiones.

Together with rural immigration, the so-called “post-revolution” immigration, triggered by political unrest and a strong wave of repressions unleashed by the Russian Empire in 1905, was also arriving to Argentina (Smolana, 1996). The members of this group were mainly skilled workers from Warsaw, Lublin, and Łódź, who settled in cities of Buenos Aires province, such as Valentín Alsina, Llavallol, Dock Sud, and, above all, Berisso (Mazurek, 2006). Many found work at the large cold stores, stockyards, factories and workshops located in the suburban area (Lobato, 2001). In short, calculations show that, before the onset of World War I,

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2 In December 1898, 100 families from Galicia already lived in Apóstoles and in 1901, near Apóstoles, Azara was founded. In 1903, 810 more Galician families settled there, with an additional 70 families from the area annexed to the Russian Empire. In the following years, Polish families established also in localities already existing, such as Cerro Corá, Bonpland, San José and Corpus (Łukasz, Stemplowski, 1983).
some seventy thousand people arrived in Argentina from Polish territory, with around forty thousand coming from the lands occupied by Russia and some thirty thousand from Galicia (Smolana, 1996). Emigration from the part annexed to Prussia was practically inexistnet, due to spectacular development of industry, which was able to absorb the unemployed workforce.

The regaining of independence in 1918, in addition to establishing first diplomatic relations between the Polish State and Argentina (Smolana, 1996), initiated a new era in the migratory processes between the two countries. Starting in the 1920s, Polish government began to pay greater attention to the phenomenon of emigration and to Polish communities around the world. This growing interest stemmed from the high rate of unemployment and the disastrous internal situation that Poland was facing. In this context, emigration began to be perceived as an effective way of solving serious social problems. Consequently, the government opted to introduce a directed, openly sponsored emigration policy, and as a result of the general instability experienced by Polish citizens combined with the pro-emigration initiatives promoted by the authorities, it is estimated that over two decades between 157 and 167 thousand people migrated to Argentina (Dembicz, Smolana, 1993). However, it is essential to clarify that, within the group registered as Polish citizens, the people who were of Polish origin amounted to no more than 40%, with the majority being Jews and Ukrainians, who were considered by Polish political establishment to be the most conflictive minorities (Mazurek, 2006).

The period after World War II is the final migratory stage. Under the pressure from international organizations, such as the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and Red Cross, Argentina permitted entry of war victims to its territory (Senkman, 1985). As a result, until the end of 1951, 32,712 people entered the country, corresponding to one third of all the refugees absorbed by Latin America. Within this group, about 19,000 were demobilized Polish soldiers and their families who, when the war ended, found themselves outside of their national frontiers. As Poland fell under the influence of the USSR, members of this group decided not to return to Popular Poland (Dembicz, Smolana, 1993). They established themselves mainly in Buenos Aires, considerably livening up community activities during the first decades of the postwar period.

Today, the time that has passed since the last group of Polish immigrants settled in Argentina is reflected in the composition of the community. People born in Poland amount to a small percentage of this community, with the majority being descendants of immigrants: children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and even
great-great-grandchildren, who were born, raised (many in exogamic families) and educated in Argentina. It is a heterogeneous group of people differing in age, sex, and educational level. Some of them continue to be engaged in activities that attempt, in one way or another, to keep the Polish culture alive. This text focuses on these people, particularly on those based in the provinces of Buenos Aires and Misiones. It is important to highlight that the immigrant groups that gave rise to today’s Polish community in Argentina had very diverse characteristics, i.e. were founded in distinct periods and the motives behind their decisions to migrate were entirely different. Nonetheless, their descendants display certain similarities in maintaining their links to Poland, which they consider to be their country of origin.

Constructing and Reconstructing Ethnic Boundaries

The sense of belonging to a community and identification with a particular group requires, invariably, a presence of another group or groups with which the individual cannot or does not want to identify. The construction of an “us” is carried out in opposition to those who do not belong to the group, that is, with reference to the “others”. The establishment of ethnic boundaries or limits, in turn, involves the existence of an ethnicity that the actors perceive as their own (Barth, 1976). That is, it requires the presence of certain elements, also called ethnic identity markers, which permit the members to maintain this division and, thus, guarantee the persistence of a community. These markers may include i.a. language, religious beliefs,

3 During the fieldwork, we interviewed eighty descendants of immigrants. In respect to the residence at the time of the interview, thirty-three people belonged to the Buenos Aires group and forty-seven were from the province of Misiones (Oberá, Colonia Wanda, and Posadas). These two cases were selected as these two provinces had been the main destinations for successive Polish migratory arriving in Argentina. Within this group, we interviewed thirty-six men and forty-four women, thirty-seven of whom were born in endogamic families and forty-three in exogamic ones. Regarding the generational distance separating the interviewees from the immigrant ancestors, we were able to interview thirty-eight children of immigrants, thirty-one grandchildren, and eleven great-grandchildren.

4 As we pointed out previously, the history of the Polish immigrants in Argentina is linked to Jewish migration. This phenomenon became particularly noticeable in the inter-war period, when Polish authorities were openly encouraging Jewish emigration. In spite of its numerical force, the descendants of Polish Jews will not be discussed in this article. That is because the ethnic boundaries of this particular group have been constructed (both in its origin and destination country) within the confines of very distinct ethnic markers (Kowalska, 1989; Bargman, 2011). Therefore, from our point of view, the complexity of this phenomenon requires an analysis that would focus exclusively on this group.
folklore, culinary customs, or various behavioral norms. Focusing on the elements around which the descendants of Polish immigrants in Argentina construct their identity, has revealed that these elements have undergone important modifications throughout the decades; modifications which, as we shall demonstrate, have taken place as a result of complex processes of reconstruction and also, frequently, of reinvention.

Language

Language, beyond its strictly communicative function, is considered to be one of the main mechanisms of identification; it is a mechanism that determines belonging to a specific group and, at the same time, establishes the boundaries with members of other communities. This is the reason why it is frequently perceived to be one of the most important ethnic identity markers. However, in case of the studied community, low level of linguistic maintenance among the children of immigrants is noteworthy, as is the linguistic maintenance among immigrants’ grandchildren is virtually nonexistent. High degree of exogamy, the efficacy of Argentinean schooling practices\(^5\), the insufficiency of community educational structures, along with the specificities of Polish language itself, were reflected in a rapid deterioration of linguistic repertoire and the subsequent substitution of ethnic language by Spanish in all contexts, including also the private one. In addition, the people interviewed have indicated the feeling of shame as one of the motives that influenced this accelerated linguistic replacement. The discriminatory attitudes that the members of the group say they have experienced – especially the older people – have, in many cases, given rise to the desire to hide certain ethnic markers, including language. These are some of the testimonies that confirm this:

\(^5\) In the case of Argentina, the key moment in the literacy campaigns for the population in general and the assimilation of immigrants in particular was when mandatory education – non-denominational and free – was established in 1884 by virtue of the law 1420. The authorities intended to reinforce the national identity of the natives and instill this identity among the foreigners and their descendants by means of educational system. In accordance with these objectives, educational practices began to place special emphasis on teaching the national anthem, and Argentinian history and geography, as well as on promoting school events, working to spread awareness regarding these school events throughout the rest of society (Bertoni, 2001). As a result, educational policy went beyond the context of children’s elementary education and set much broader objectives, oriented toward achieving the insertion of an entire family group into the existing structures.
Poles were ashamed; they were ashamed to speak Polish. I don’t know why, I don’t know. They made fun of us in school. Children, children like us, the same age. We were ashamed to speak in Polish. That might be why (Woman, 71 years old, mother and father both Polish, from Misiones).

The natives made fun of us because they said that anyone who spoke Polish expressed themselves badly, pronounced the words badly. They failed us because of that, because we said “caro” instead of “carro” (Woman, 69 years old, Polish father, Misiones Province).

The high degree of vulnerability that Polish language has displayed in contact with the majority language in the Argentinian context, a visible characteristic among all the migratory groups that gave formed the present-day Polish community, has led us to analyze the importance of another factor that influences the process of maintaining linguistic competence, i.e. the prestige of a given language. This element is closely related to language’s value in cultural, political, economic, and religious areas, and depends on the number of people who use it, as well as its usefulness in the communicative process within a specific society (Gugenberger, 2001).

In other words, it is linked to its instrumental function, a characteristic that acquires particular importance among immigrants and their descendants. In this context, it can be pointed out that the Polish community in Argentina has not been known for its strong economic position or for standing out in the cultural or political arenas. Therefore, the use of ethnic language could not guarantee greater prestige for its speakers outside of the family and community structures. On the contrary, as we have indicated, in some cases, speaking Polish caused others to mock the speakers and provoked discriminatory attitudes. In addition, the absence of new immigrants since the 1950s, the distance between the two countries, and decades of almost non-existent contacts with the authorities of Popular Poland caused a progressive decrease in the instrumental value of Polish.

Religion and Religious Practices

Just like language, religion and religious practices are considered to be potent identity markers that link the members of the same ethnic group to one another while differentiating them from other groups. As for the religious beliefs of the members of today’s Polish community, the panorama seems, at first sight, to be highly homogeneous: the large majority of the interviewees claim to be Roman Catholic. However, this statement requires a series of clarifications and a necessary differentiation between religion seen as an institution and perceived as a series of
beliefs, on one hand, and specific practices, usually called popular religiosity, on the other hand (Alba, et. al, 2009). Even though these aspects are closely related, they fulfill different functions and include different dimensions in the life of communities with immigrant origins.

Despite our interviewees’ declarations regarding their creed, the study revealed that the belief system, as well as the institution behind it, occupies a marginal place in their lives; such characteristic is particularly visible among middle-aged and the youngest people. This is clearly not specific exclusively to Polish community but rather is a consequence of a general secularization of the society and its distancing from the Church, which has taken place in recent decades both in Poland and in Argentina. The present-day situation clearly contrasts with the testimonies regarding the function of the Catholic religion and the Polish Church in the life of the community in earlier decades. The majority of interviewed people coincide in stating that for a long time religion and Church have acted as a unifying force among the members of the community. The importance of religion in the early stages is confirmed by the following testimony about the early years of Polish settlement in the Misiones Province:

[Before, the colonists] maintained their religion very much, or the religion maintained them. You know what? This religion, this Virgin Mary of Częstochowa, maintained them. I think that they had to believe, they had to have this faith (...). Because if not, all they could do was cry all day (Woman, 65 years old, Polish mother and father, Posadas, Misiones).

As this testimony shows, religious beliefs often gave the immigrants invaluable moral support, becoming a source of consolation when faced with “worldly evils” and making it possible to face numerous adversities encountered in daily life. In this regard, the phrase quoted above (the colonists “maintained their religion very much, or the religion maintained them”) shows the essence of the role that religion played in the first phases of settlement. In parallel, Polish Church became the main space of sociability. Weekly participation in the masses, beyond being an intrinsic element of the Roman Catholic rite, was an opportunity to interact with other Poles and, for many, a chance to continue to maintain their mother tongue.

When focusing on present-day situation, the interviewees confirmed having observed a progressive distancing from the Church and emphasized that its influence has diminished considerably in recent decades. This phenomenon, visible both in Buenos Aires and in the Misiones Province, is reflected in the decreasing attendance at masses, as reported by Polish priests, and in church attendance in ge-
nal, especially among young people. However, if we reflect on specific practices and rituals, linked to different religious holidays, it becomes evident that they continue to act as a symbol of ethnic belonging, fulfilling the function of a powerful identity marker.

The majority of the interviewees confirmed strong presence of religious components and specific practices that accompanied the celebration of Christmas and Easter in their infancy and adolescence, and their continued presence in their adult lives. It is interesting to point out, however, that these practices, rather than reflecting attachment to religious beliefs, are frequently perceived as “family traditions”, celebrated for decades, and an intrinsic part of their education. One of the respondents commented on the customs that she maintained in her private context in the following manner:

For me, it is important to keep up Easter traditions, Christmas traditions. And it is how we learned to live and it is what we transmit to our children. I mean, there’s something that comes naturally, you can’t say, well, all my life for Easter I made pisanki, and one day you say: I won’t do this anymore because it’s been a lot of years since we came over from Poland. I mean, it doesn’t make sense. Each person passes on what they learned, and the Argentinian learned that you buy Easter eggs somewhere and we learned it like this. So I don’t know if it’s, like, a family tradition and whether it will remain, but in reality, you pass on what you learned (Woman, 37 years old, Polish maternal grandparents, Buenos Aires).

Finally, we would like to point out that the preservation of some elements of Polish culture and religiosity by the community with immigrant origins does not mean that this culture and religiosity are maintained unaltered or that they are immune to contact with dominant society and with other ethnic groups. The time and context, in which a certain group exists, often condition and modify specific practices. For example, if we compare testimonies regarding the traditions related to Catholic rites in the past and in the present, there is a noteworthy absence of one element that used to be fundamental in earlier times. As we have been able to observe, the activities that require the use of the Polish language have been excluded from festivities; this can be seen, for example, in the disappearance of Polish Christmas carols or the songs that commemorate the resurrection. On the other hand, the variety of traditional dishes that accompany these celebrations is among the elements that have been most strongly preserved. However, the way they are prepared and the choice of menu are not exempt from significant modifications, clearly marked by specific conditions, in which the holidays are organized. One of the interviewed residents of Oberá described how the climate, along with Argentinian customs, determined culinary choices:
At the end of the year, we celebrate Christmas. With all of the members of the group. There, it doesn’t exactly coincide with Christmas, it’s the weekend before. The typical Polish Christmas rituals are made with opłatek. And here, because of how hot it is in December, many of the food rituals are not the same as there (…). There are the typical foods, but there are more roasts and cold food. There, on Christmas Eve you have the twelve dishes, here we do it a little more diversified. There might be pierogi, there’s cabbage. But more than anything, its roasts (Woman 27 years old, Polish maternal grandparents, Oberá, Misiones).

In this particular case, Christmas Eve dinner, which is traditionally celebrated in Poland with twelve dishes, none of which contains meat, has incorporated the roast, a fundamental element of Argentinian culinary tradition, into the menu.

**Folklorism**

While the importance that the members of the present-day Polish community in Argentina place on language and religion has diminished considerably, this has not been the case of cultural expressions based on folklore or those related to culinary aspects. Regarding this, we have been able to detect a clear preference for the use of certain visible symbols, which have the capacity to awaken strong emotions among their users, and in addition, do not interfere in everyday obligations (Gans, 1979). As a result, folklorism, which is capable of captivating one’s attention, and which can be identified relatively easily, has managed to occupy an outstanding position within the group. Music and dance, which fulfill these requirements, have become a powerful way of channeling feelings of ethnic belonging, an element that marks the feeling of belonging and the feeling of otherness (Martí, 1999). At the same time, the preference for attire that is considered traditional, which the members of the community present in nearly all the acts for both the Polish community and outsiders, is noteworthy.

This predilection for folklorism mainly owes to the fact that, besides being visible and easily identifiable, music and dance are the two elements that clearly manage to awaken very deep emotions among the members of the community. Thus, being a member of a specific dance group or wearing a typical costume during specific events acquires, in the eyes of the interviewees, an important symbolic value; it is a way of publicly expressing their ethnic belonging and becomes a way of “rendering homage” to immigrant ancestors and their culture. The fact that the immigrants themselves probably did not give the same value to the elements mentioned above – and, we could even dare to say, were mostly unaware of them – does not seem important to the interviewees. This is not only because of the clearly sty-
lized form that these elements present today, but because they are cultural expressions, which belong to geographical regions separated by a vast distance.

Despite the evident lack of connection between ancestors’ culture and traditions, and the way in which they are represented today, dances, attire and music are perceived by the majority of the members of the community as the quintessence of “Polishness”. Consequently, besides having a great capacity to move the members of the community, these elements allow them to feel that they are members of a differentiated group that carries a specific culture, which they perceive to be extremely attractive and original. We can see this in the following testimony:

I think that we try, or at least I, for my part, try – and I think it’s what everyone intends – to transmit the culture that Poland has. Poland has an ancient culture, with great richness and a whole lot of things. I mean, there are the costumes, the dances, the figures (Man, 23 years old, four Polish grandparents, Buenos Aires).

Thus, the “ancient culture” of Poland, to which this last interviewee refers, finds its maximum expression in popular dances and traditional attire. Therefore, this is a selection and posterior resignification of symbolic aspects of the reference cultures that are considered to be the most outstanding ones (Irazuzta, 2001); a resignification which, in the analyzed case, finds its highest expression in folklorism.

The privileged place which dances, music, and folkloric attire occupy within the respective Polish groups, in addition to reflecting the symbolic character of ethnicity that the descendants of the immigrants maintain (Gans, 1979), is owes, to a great extent, to the external context of the community, in which these groups are inserted. From the 1980s onward, an important shift in the attitude of Argentinian authorities towards different ethnic communities has been observed. This was reflected in the organization of numerous festivities, festivals, and fairs hosted by groups with immigrant origins, which were celebrated in open, public places, such as plazas, streets, and parks. The change in the attitude, which has grown stronger during the new millennium, has not only encouraged many of the descendants of immigrants to reassess their ethnic origins, but has also determined the choice of the symbols exhibited to manifest belonging to a specific group. This is because the celebratory context of the mentioned acts has been characterized by favoring the most depoliticized aspects of the culture of the participating groups (Irazuzta, 2001). As an example, we could mention Buenos Aires Celebra (Buenos Aires Celebrates) and Patio Gastronómico de Colectividades (Group Gastronomic Patio) (both events organized in Buenos Aires), and the Fiesta Nacional del Inmigrante (Misiones Province). These events receive substantial support from the authorities and, year after year, manage to attract multitudes.
2001). As a result, dances and popular music, exhibitions of traditional attire, as well as tasting “typical” dishes, have become a prominent element of all the organized events.

It is noteworthy that the importance given to the festivals sponsored by the Argentinian authorities has also been reflected in a change in the community’s internal priorities. This is demonstrated, for example, by a note published by the central organism of the group, the Union of Poles in the Argentinian Republic (Unión de los Polacos en la República Argentina, UPRA), referring to “Buenos Aires Celebra Polonia”. As we can read in the note, the act is defined in terms of “a unique event on the national level” and one of “the most important, moving, and colorful events of our community in the City of Buenos Aires”. It is interesting to observe how this recently-created event, which saw the light of day for the first time in 2009, and in which the Polish community has participated since 2010, in a very short time, not only entered the community agenda, but also has managed to occupy a notable place in the holiday calendar of a group that has existed for over a century.

In this sense, it is remarkable how cultural manifestations of Polish community are subject to modifications when they cease to be organized by and for the members and, in response to official initiatives, become a spectacle for a broader public. The celebratory ambience, the organization of events on weekends in order to ensure high attendance by the public, the priority given to the aesthetic dimension, and the objective of entertaining the spectators who come to the events, determine not only the choice but also the order of the exhibited elements. Thus, for example, one of the women interviewed pointed out the strategies used by a dance group to capture the spectators’ attention:

The reality is that the Argentinian public is a public that is very effusive when they like something and very cold when they don’t like something, and you realize it right away. When you see that you go out to dance and it’s a dance that starts kind of slow (…) people are getting up and leaving, or you see that they start to talk. They don’t wait. So you have to start with something that, kind of explodes, because if not, the people leave (Woman, 28 years old, Polish paternal grandfather, Buenos Aires).

As a result, the attempts to capture the audience’s attention are reflected in the efforts to adapt the ethnic traditions to contexts, in which they are being exhibited. Thus, paradoxically, during the events that try to introduce the outside-of-the-community audience to the particularities of Polish culture, many of these particu-

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larities are often suppressed. In this way, the elements whose meaning might be unintelligible to the spectators, for example, the use of the ethnic language, are excluded from the “performance”. One of the members of a Buenos Aires dance group explained the specific nature of exhibitions and the reasons for the modifications the acts undergo in these terms:

The thing about Polish folklore is that there is a lot of singing involved. So being there five minutes singing a song in Polish that people have no idea what you’re saying, is pretty boring (…). They don’t understand what you’re saying and you can interpret it, by the act and everything, but something always gets lost, because you can’t use a gesture for each of the words you’re saying. So this really influences how you present yourself to the different audiences. Because out there with a Polish public, you can present a dance with more singing, and with an Argentinian public you can’t. It has to be something more visual than anything else (Woman, 37 years old, Polish maternal grandparents, Buenos Aires).

On the other hand, the fact of dramatizing ethnicity often involves efforts to highlight certain characteristics, among them, the phenotypic characteristics, which supposedly respond to the image of how a Polish man or woman should look physically. This is reflected, for example, in this story told by one of the members of a dance group about the preparations that precede the group’s act:

The makeup is like stage makeup, everything needs to be much more accentuated; the mouth needs to be really red so that the expression is noticeable (…). So you have to have makeup that helps to transmit, even if it’s only for the people in the first 20 rows, so that they can see if you smile… Then, for the eyes, we use fake eyelashes so they kind of open up more. We also all use, for example, blue eyeshadow, so it looks like we all have light eyes from far away. It’s to deceive people a little, close up you say, she doesn’t have blue eyes, her eyes are brown, but it doesn’t matter (Woman, 28 years old, Polish paternal grandfather, Buenos Aires).

The following testimony, which describes the “aesthetic repairs” that one of the members of the Polish community had to undergo before presenting her candidacy in the “Elections of the Queen” during the National Holiday of the Immigrant of Oberá show this concern with fitting external expectations:

And here there’s kind of a half craziness, shall we say, within the group with the older people, that the person has to be blond (…). I don’t know if you noticed, but Natalia’s hair is pretty dark… Well, when she was queen, they started to dye it and dye it and dye it. She had to be blond. And why? We Poles aren’t all blond (Woman 51 years old, Polish paternal great-grandparents, Oberá, Misiones).
These last testimonies show how the strategies employed to attract the public, the efforts to show the content that has an impact, as well as certain competitiveness among the participating groups, are conditioned by others’ perception of the Polish group and by what the public expects to see during the exhibition.

**Food**

Ethnic food has a similar function as folklorism. The preparation and, above all, consumption of different dishes considered to be typical act as a potent ethnic marker, which the descendants of immigrants turn to in order to affirm their ethnic identity and differentiate themselves from others. During the interviews allusions to specific food customs were very frequent, accompanied by detailed descriptions of the preparation of specific dishes, the use of certain ingredients, and the ritual that accompanies the consumption of the food. Despite the time that has passed since the arrival of the last migratory group, food customs continue to enjoy great popularity among the members of the community, independently of their place of residence, age, or temporal distance separating the interviewees from their immigrant ancestors. In addition, in the testimonies referring to culinary customs, we found recurring allusions to what we could call a “Polish taste”. According to the definition of our interviewees, “Polish taste” is reflected in preference for certain dishes or specific ingredients. At the same time, in the eyes of the interviewed people, it is an element that differentiates them from those who do not form part of the group. One of the interviewees explained it in the following words:

More than anything, in my case it was with the food, in my family, lots of love was transmitted with the food, it was like, if they love you, they cook well for you, and, besides, the issue of the tastes. All my friends were for ham and cheese and I took sandwiches with sweet-sour pickles to school. I love them! So it’s like I had a palate that was much more (...) like I liked vinegar and all those things (Woman, 36 years old, Polish paternal grandparents, Buenos Aires).

Preference for certain dishes or foods is perceived to be the result of intergenerational transmission of specific culinary norms, an element that is learned at the heart of the family and is a link to Polish origins. It is interesting to highlight that the descendants of the immigrants have often indicated the perception of this “Polish taste”, which is reflected in the consumption of “typical” food, even if only on certain occasions, as a way of preserving their “roots”. In other words, considering how some of the interviewed people acknowledge themselves incapable of transmitting certain norms of ethnic behavior to their children, the fact of accus-
toming them to eating Polish food seems to compensate, at least partly, the interruption of the transmission of Polish culture and traditions that took place in other contexts:

My children don’t speak Polish. Because I married an Argentinian and we spend all day away from home. What they did learn is to eat fermented cabbage and fermented pickles (...). And normally, when it’s cold, we eat Polish food, because they learned that when they were little and they like it. And chorizo too... We also eat soup. I remember that Polish families ate soup every day. I prepare it once a week (Woman, 65 years old, both parents Polish, Colonia Wanda, Misiones).

On the other hand, the way of preserving food and preparing certain dishes reflects the geographical singularities of the environment, which particular groups originally inhabited. This is why attempts to reproduce traditional recipes in a different context undergo forced modifications; modifications that have also affected the form and composition of the dishes that the interviewees perceive to be “typically” Polish. Responding to a question aimed at finding out how to obtain ingredients that are not common in Argentina, one of the people answered, “You make it with what you have”. Indeed, as the gathered testimonies indicate, certain elements of Polish cooking are frequently substituted with different, relatively similar ones that are easier to acquire. For example, twarog – white cheese or cottage cheese, part of the filling of the pierogi – has been substituted by ricotta cheese, wild mushrooms by common mushrooms, and bigos, a sauerkraut-based dish which involves a long process of fermenting the cabbage, to which different kinds of meat are added, is often prepared with unfermented cabbage. The substitution of some ingredients by others is not the only transformation observed. The incorporation of elements foreign to Polish cooking has also been observed. This is the case of sweet potato paste or dulce de leche in the preparation of “traditional” baked goods, as well as the Bolognese sauce that often accompanies the aforementioned pierogi.

Values

Throughout the interviews, we were able to observe that, although founding elements, on which the descendants of Polish immigrants construct their feeling of belonging, are very different from those employed by the immigrants themselves, and in spite of adopting cultural features of the dominant society, Polish community in Argentina continues to perceive themselves as a group that can be differentiated. The fact that they form part of a specific community is closely related to the primordialist vision, which the interviewees construct regarding their ethnic belonging. This ethnic belonging is considered to be the result of a shared origin or history and
is, therefore, accepted as an inherited, involuntary element. In consonance with this “biologizing” vision, the group perceives itself to be a carrier of a series of specific features which, in turn, differentiate it from other groups. This is why, in addition to creating a feeling of belonging and fomenting links of solidarity, the sensation of being in possession of shared characteristics fulfills the function of drawing limits regarding the “others” (Barth, 1976). In the context analyzed in this paper, the objective differences have frequently lost the capacity to clearly define ethnic boundaries in daily life (Alba, 1990). Thus, self-perception of being carriers of specific characteristics acquires, in the eyes of the interviewees, a primordial role when it comes to differentiating themselves from others.

Based on the gathered testimonies, we have been able to detect a series of values and qualities that the members of the community have repeatedly mentioned as those that best define Polish immigrants and their descendants. When we asked our interviewees to describe the elements that, according to them, characterized Polish community, the adjective “hard-working” clearly stood out in first place, frequently accompanied by the nouns “effort” and “sacrifice”. The interviewees have identified work – not necessarily linked to the fruits it brings, but rather as a reason for pride for those who carry it out – as a source of a specific culture and the fundamental element of the education they received. Highly positive attitude towards work is presented as a reference rooted in a common past, transmitted along blood lines. It has also been identified as a trait which, beyond guaranteeing individual progress, is mainly oriented towards achieving well-being for the family and the group.

The next shared characteristic is the importance of maintaining family ties, a constant concern for guaranteeing family well-being and strong attachment to preserving a family model we could refer to as traditional. As the narratives show, the members of the Polish group are very clear on what the characteristics of their ethnic group are: they are hard workers, capable of sacrificing themselves for future generations, who place particular value on maintaining family ties. In this regard, it is not very surprising that the people interviewed tend to evaluate their group positively and turn to characteristics or behavioral norms that they consider highly valuable to describe themselves. However, if we compare these testimonies to studies carried out on other communities with similar characteristics, the values perceived as exclusive to Polish immigrants and their descendants turn out to be quite similar and, we could even say, identical, as in the case of other groups with origins located in different countries.
Conclusions

We aimed to demonstrate that throughout the decades the elements, on which the descendants of Polish immigrants construct their ethnic identity, have undergone several important modifications. The cultural aspects which, at present, are perceived as their own and, therefore, different from those of other groups are not a faithful reproduction of the culture and traditions of their immigrant ancestors. The transformations that the ethnicity of the group has experienced are reflected not only in the changes that the respective ethnic markers have undergone, but are also manifested in different degrees of importance – in comparison to earlier periods – that the members of today’s Polish community associate with specific cultural aspects. We can state that the descendants of immigrants show a clear preference for certain specific elements while others, traditionally considered fundamental for maintaining ethnic boundaries and which, for decades, acted as main differentiating features, have lost their prominence.

We have been able to observe this, for example, in the displacement of Polish language as a communication tool within the group and in the secondary or even marginal role of the religious system in the lives of the members of the group. At the same time, we have been able to detect a clear preference for the use of specific symbols, which are visible, relatively easy to reproduce, and are capable of provoking strong emotions among those who use them, and whose preservation does not require excessive amounts of time or effort. Such, for example, is the case of the cultural expressions based on folklore and those related to culinary aspects. This phenomenon has proven that a group can continue to preserve its identification with a specific origin even if they have introduced important modifications to the features of their culture (Barth, 1976).

In other words, we have been able to demonstrate that, even though the elements around which the descendants of the Polish immigrants construct their sense of belonging are very different from those used by the immigrants themselves, and even though today’s Polish community in Argentina has taken on the cultural features of the dominant society, this does not prevent them from perceiving themselves – and being perceived – as a group that can be differentiated. To synthesize, the displacement of what we could call objective differences between different groups, such as language or religion, and a high dose of symbolism displayed as a maintained ethnicity, go along with a clearly subjective perception of actual persistence these differences.
Bibliography


