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Pierogies to hamburgers: An immigration story

Madeline Cross

Introduction:

This ethnographic study examines the experiences of an immigrant from Poland through visual media. The process of becoming a citizen, the transition to American culture, and current identity as a Polish American are addressed. The consultant for this ethnography is Agnieszka (Agnes) Kubas who is a Junior at Illinois Wesleyan University. Agnes moved from Poland to America 12 years ago.

In 2011, 1,062,040 immigrants attained legal status, of which 6,634 were from Poland (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Despite the relatively small number of Polish immigrants, they represent the second largest immigrant population in the Chicago land area (Institute of Government and Public Affairs, 2011). The first big wave of Polish immigration to America began in the 1850's, largely to escape poverty in occupied Poland. Since that first wave, Poles have tended to congregate in established Polish neighborhoods. The congregation can be attributed to many factors, including nearby relatives, familiar languages, and ethnic amenities such as food shops and churches. This phenomenon has resulted in Chicago having the second largest Polish population in the country, with only New York City having more (Szuber, 2008).

Agnes's immigration story is a culmination of historical and cultural factors that she experienced on a personal level. The three main themes of Agnes's story were the language barrier, the transition to the American educational system, and the way her experiences have impacted her identity.

Her immigration story is unique to her but also represents common themes that many immigrants face.

Assumptions and early hypotheses:

Prior to coming to college in Illinois, I had little experience with Polish heritage. My home state of Minnesota has many people with German and Scandinavian backgrounds but very few people are from Eastern Europe. The immigrants I have known have been primarily from England, Mexico, and Canada. Since arriving in Illinois for school, I have noticed a change in the cultural background of my friends. Many of the Illinois Wesleyan University students are from the Chicago area, and thus many are of Polish descent.

As I made friends with more Polish Americans, I began to hear more about the culture and the distinctive Polish neighborhoods within Chicago. I also quickly learned that people with unpronounceable names had Polish backgrounds. My current roommate is third generation Polish so I have learned a lot about the Polish culture from her. Visiting her family for a weekend was an immersion into Polish culture. I came in to this project with some understanding of the culture (like the food) from my years in Illinois and living with someone of Polish descent.

I had little contact with immigrants in general prior to this project. My schools and neighborhood growing up had no immigrant families. The closest I came was becoming friends with foreign exchange students in my high school. My family hosted a foreign exchange student, Anna, from Germany for

eleven months. She faced many cultural changes in her time with us. I watched Anna hesitate to speak in public because she could not speak perfectly. Among many things, she also had to adjust to new food, new popular culture, and new friends.

From my own experiences travelling abroad in Denmark for a semester, I could picture how difficult a permanent transition would be. The language barrier especially is something that would be a daunting challenge. There are so many little things that make up a culture that people are not even aware of. However, once all those little things change, it adds up to a relatively big transition. I noticed that I was more aware of my identity as an American after seeing how different other cultures were. I wondered if Agnes had experienced the same thing with her Polish identity when she arrived here.

There has not been much research conducted on Polish immigration, perhaps because Polish immigrants make up a relatively small percentage (0.6% in 2011) of American immigrants (United States Department of Homeland Security, 2011). However, many of the challenges I imagined an immigrant would face, such as learning a new language, were addressed in the literature. Scholars of the field seem to focus especially on the obstacles faced in the school environment during the transition.

Reading the literature before conducting the interviews gave me some background into what Agnes's experiences might be. Much of the literature specifically mentioned Chicago in reference to Polish immigration. This confirmed what I had heard from my friends who lived in Chicago. I wondered

how immigrating to a place with a large Polish population had impacted her experience.

Ethnographic Methods:

I utilized interviews and participant observation over a one month period to collect information. The first interview was the longest and the most formal. It took place on February 7th and lasted 1.5 hours. I started with general, open-ended question and then asked more specific follow up questions. I used this format to allow her story to guide the interview in order to reduce the impact of my previous assumptions about what was important. There were several follow up interviews that were much shorter and less formal as we got to know each other. By coincidence, we live next door to each other which made our meetings easy to do in short intervals when we were both free. After the first interview, we always met at one of our houses (Figure 1). I found that the conversation flowed more naturally in that familiar environment.



Figure1 Collaboration: Working together to decide on the most important themes to include from Agnes's story.

After sharing her story, Agnes showed me photo albums from both before and after the move from Poland. She talked about each photo so I was able to better envision her life at that time. From those photos, we decided which ones to include in the essay and how to create new images to represent all of the aspects that we decided were important. Agnes is an art major, so her expertise was invaluable while producing the new images. When deciding which images to include with the essay, we first determined the themes that we felt were most important to the story. Once we decided which themes deserved a picture, we either modified an existing picture to convey the point or we took a new photo. We had to modify images from her past because we were not able to take new ones to portray themes from her childhood. To represent her current identity, we set up several scenes to create new images.

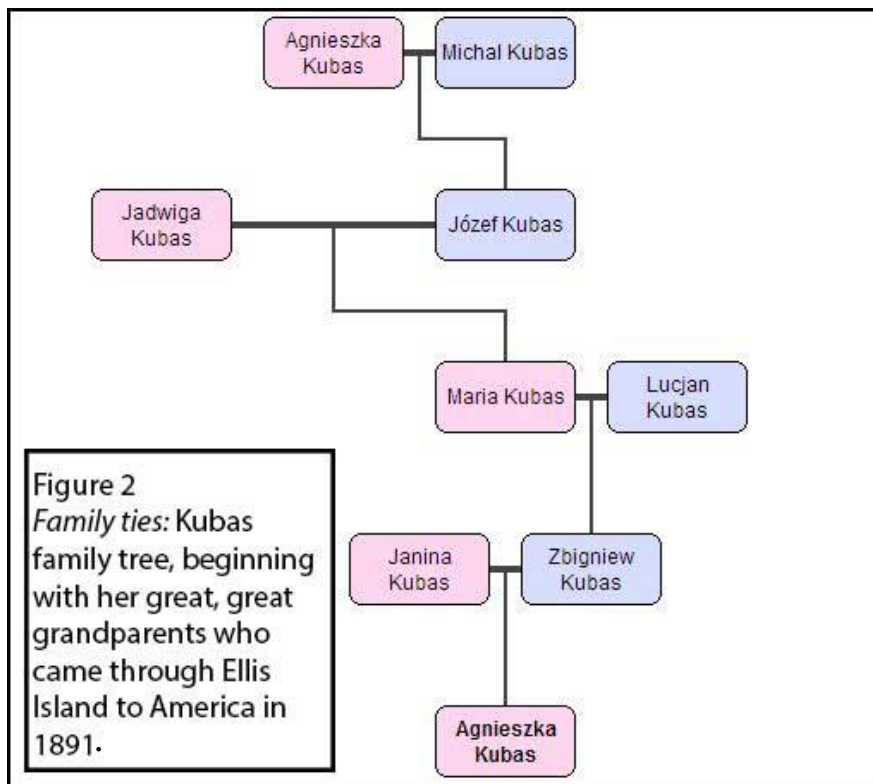
For one of our meetings, Agnes made me a traditional Polish dinner. I enjoyed watching her in her element as she shaped the pierogies. As we ate the meal, we enjoyed talking about our favorite traditional foods and the differences between cultures. This more informal observation allowed me to get Agnes's opinions in a more relaxed, familiar environment. We shopped for the ingredients together at an international food store and she pointed out all of her favorite foods she remembers from back home. Shopping for and eating the food gave me a good sense of Agnes's culture and her relationship to traditions.

Presentation of Data:

Among the many blondes at Illinois Wesleyan, it is hard to guess at a glance that Agnes has a unique story. Agnieszka Kubas immigrated to America when she was eleven

from a rural town in Poland and now holds a dual citizenship.

Her path to citizenship began many decades ago (See figure 2) when her great-great-grandparents came through Ellis Island and settled in Chicago in search of financial opportunities. Her great, great grandmother and namesake, Agnieszka Kubas, came here with her fiancé and got married in Chicago. They gave birth to her great grandfather Józef, making him the first



American citizen in the family. Due to poor health of a relative back in Poland, the new family left America and returned to Poland soon after arriving. One generation later, Józef's daughter Maria became the next person to make the journey to America. Maria was able to attain citizenship because her father, Józef, had been born in America. Maria left her family behind to start a crocheting business in Chicago. Years later, Maria's son and Agnes's father, Zbigniew, left Agnes and the rest of his family in 1994 to join his mother and brother in Chicago. Agnes, along with her mother and two brothers continued to live in Poland until 2001 when the whole family moved to Schiller Park, Illinois where they remain today.

For Agnes, the process of becoming an American citizen was made very simple because of the family ties tracing back generations. As an eleven year old, she was virtually unaware of the process. This is a source of guilt for Agnes because her citizenship was so easily acquired while for many others it is a process that can take years, if it happens at all. Many of her relatives back in Poland are unable to get approval for American citizenship because their familial connections are less direct than parental. Similarly, many of her Polish immigrant peers are on a temporary visa and must face a decision of whether to remain illegally or to return to Poland.

Agnes does not very clearly remember what Poland was like because she came to America when she was so young (Figure 3). She reports feeling a little guilty for not

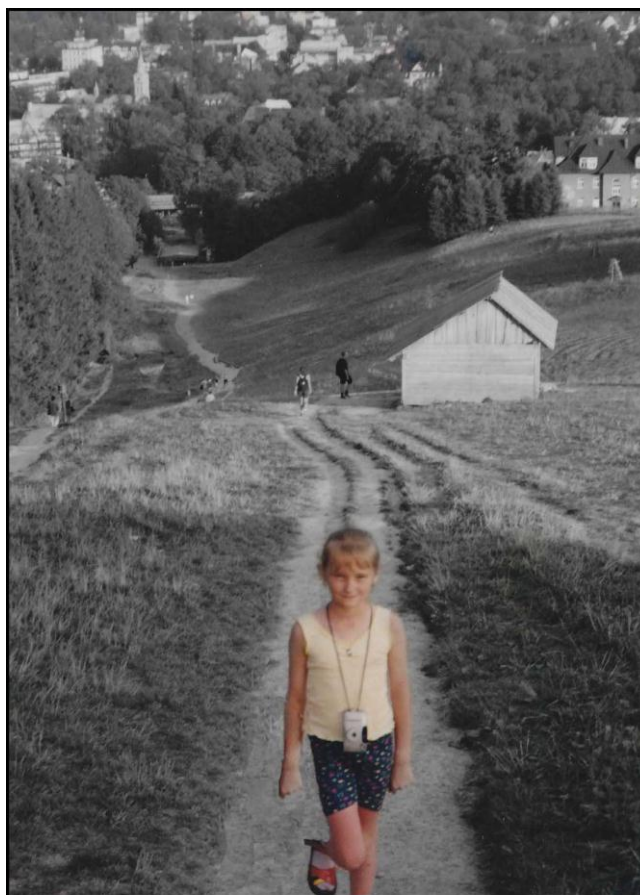


Figure 3
Remembering: Agnes's memory of Poland is fading. Here Agnes appears on a road just outside her hometown, Debica, two years before coming to America.

remembering where she grew up and where much of her extended family still lives.

However, she was old enough to miss things from her home country and compare them to America. It is obvious talking about the differences between cultures that she was young when she immigrated. Only an eleven year old would note how different the playgrounds in each country were.

Agnes also remembers that it was difficult growing up while her dad was in a different country. When he would come home to visit over the summer, Agnes and her brothers called him "Mr. Kubas" because he was

unfamiliar. Agnes's mom took many pictures to send to her dad of Agnes growing up. However, pictures are clearly not a sufficient substitute for experiencing memories together.

Agnes remembers receiving gifts from her dad and grandma in Chicago. As a kid, America seemed like an exotic land. Agnes knew that the family was eventually going to join her dad in America when they had enough money to start a life with the whole family in Chicago. She also remembers hoping that she would not lose her "Polishness" as she called it.

When her family was finally scheduled to reunite in America, Agnes was about to face a tough transition to a new life in a foreign

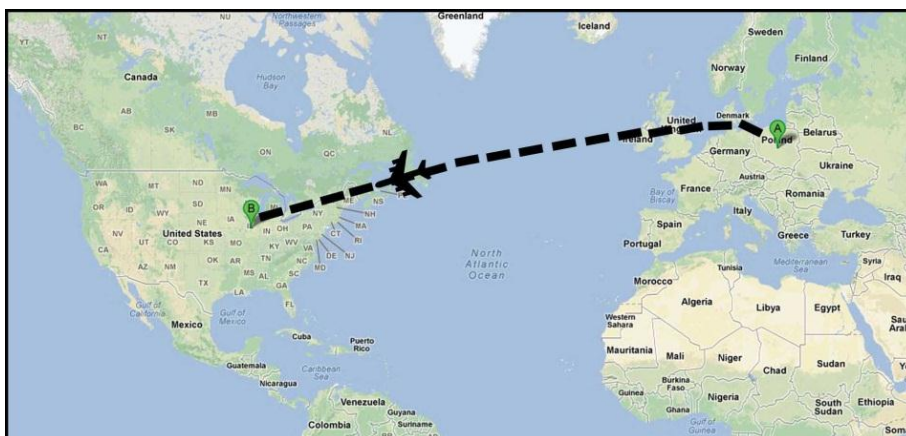


Figure 4
The journey begins:
Agnes's trip from
Debica, Poland to
Schiller Park, Illinois in
2001.

culture. The summer she turned eleven, Agnes took her first plane ride from Debica, Poland and arrived at her new home in Schiller Park, Illinois (Figure 4).

One of the biggest elements of the transition was the new language. Agnes did not speak any English when she arrived. She had been taking French, not English, in school and American TV and music were not available to her growing up. To succeed in her new life, Agnes ended up carrying around a Polish-English dictionary (Figure 5).

Not knowing English prevented Agnes from doing many things, both socially and academically. The learning process was made even harder because her family spoke exclusively Polish at home. Agnes's dad knew English from living in America for many years, but Polish was still spoken

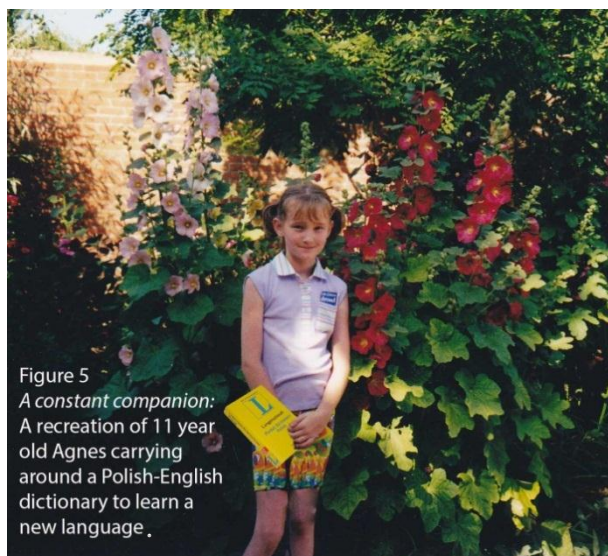


Figure 5
A constant companion:
A recreation of 11 year
old Agnes carrying
around a Polish-English
dictionary to learn a
new language.

within the family. Hearing English only outside her home made it harder to pick up the new language. Fortunately, Agnes was determined to succeed in her new environment and, with the help of her Polish English dictionary, dedicated herself to the task.

Agnes credits reading for much of her success at learning the language. She started with nursery rhyme books and kept advancing until she was reading novels in English. However, even after she knew the language, she was still hesitant to speak because she knew she sounded different. Her shyness made her language acquisition seem much slower than it actually was.

The issue with learning a new language is intricately involved with the immersion into the American school system. When asked what the hardest part of moving here was, Agnes blurts without hesitation that it was school. Attending school without speaking the language is all but impossible (Figure 6).

It was especially hard on Agnes because she was accustomed to being at the top of her class in Poland. She remembers the teachers essentially ignoring her and telling her to draw pictures while the rest of the class learned.

The expectations of her new school were very different than in Poland. Polish elementary schools expected students to sit still, remain silent, and take notes. The American schools were much less regulated. Agnes says that having other Polish kids in her class was the only thing that made the transition easier. Several of her classmates had also experienced the transition from Poland and were able to help by speaking to her in her native tongue.

Agnes's favorite parts of the day were art class and ESL (English as a second language). These classes allowed her to interact with more supportive teachers and students. She was able to get to know other immigrants who were experiencing the same

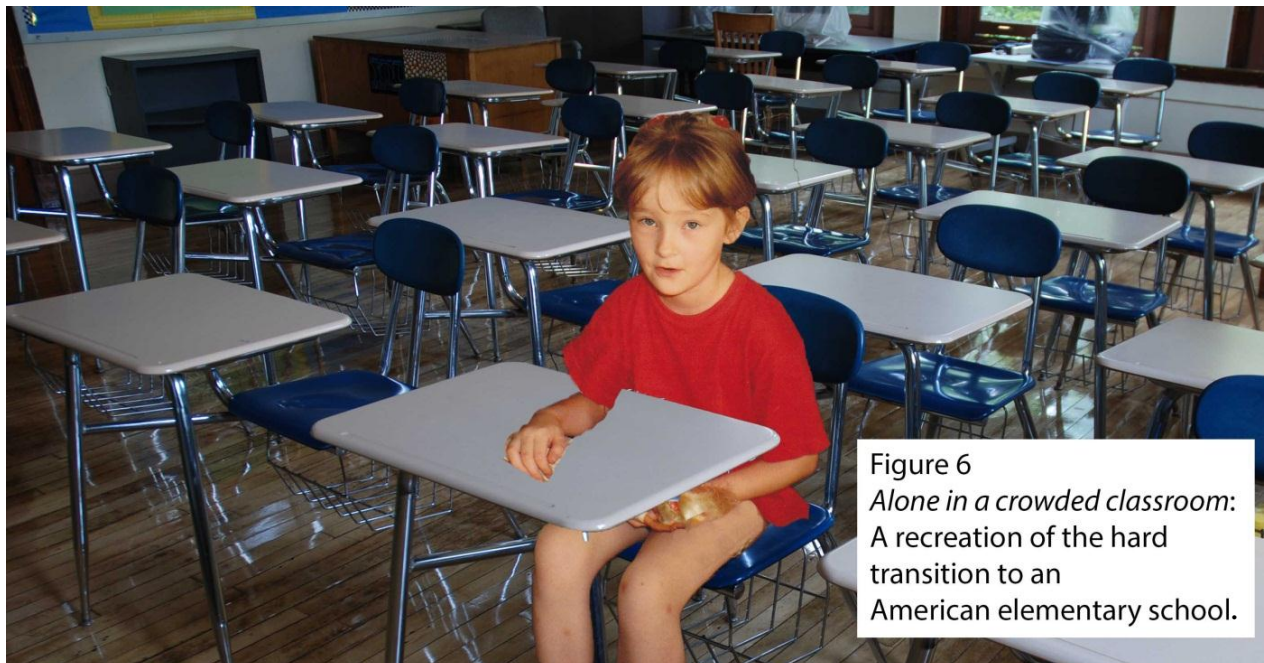


Figure 6
Alone in a crowded classroom:
A recreation of the hard
transition to an
American elementary school.

challenges. The classes were also were important ways to learn English in a stress-free environment

Her worst memory of her new school was being called stupid by one of the teachers. The teacher was discussing Agnes with another teacher but was not aware that Agnes could understand what she was saying. Agnes's shyness exacerbated the difficulty of learning a new language and succeeding in a foreign school. To be called stupid during the difficult transition was very disheartening to Agnes.

However, her hard work eventually paid off when she started receiving top grades and graduated at the top of her class. Agnes proved that it is possible to succeed in a school in a foreign country despite the many challenges.

The last big theme of Agnes's story is an ongoing process. Her identity has been shaped by her Polish roots, her American life, and by her experiences as an immigrant who bridged the two worlds. She is more than just a Polish

American; she is a 1.5 generation immigrant.

Food is one of the ways that she expresses her Polish identity and preferences (Figure 7). At home in Schiller Park, her mom buys food at some of the Polish delis and bakeries that are so numerous in Chicago. It is harder to find Polish specialty items in Bloomington-Normal, but there is an international food store that she frequents to find her favorite Polish foods. Agnes says that on a daily basis, small things will remind her of her Polish heritage such as a television show referencing Polish sausage.

Looking around her room, it is obvious from the Polish words on many of the food packages that she keeps her identity alive through what she eats. Each time she goes home for a break, her mom teaches her a new Polish recipe to make. Practices like these will keep the Polish food traditions alive for generations.

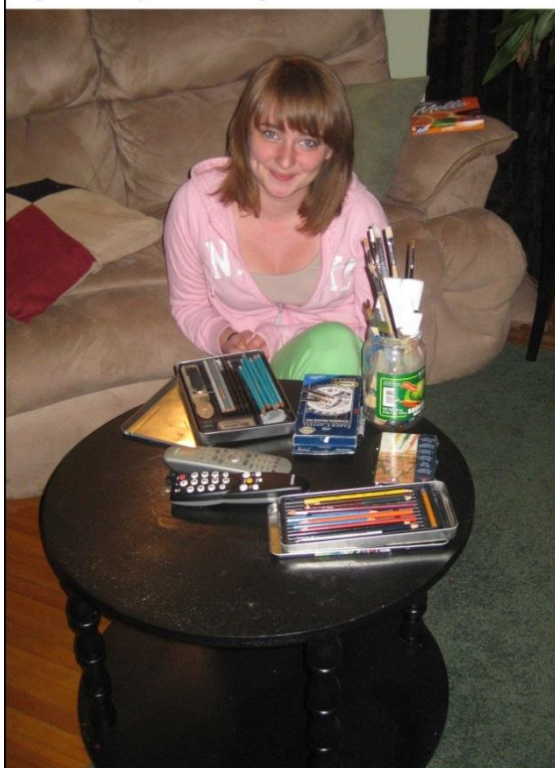
"I could understand the mean things they said, I was just too shy to tell them."

Figure 7
A taste of home:
Agnes in an international food store where she can find her favorite foods from Poland



Figure 8

Hobby turned vocation: Art began as a way to succeed without speaking a word and is now Agnes's major in college.



Even Agnes's choice of majors in college can be linked to her background and identity as an immigrant. She started enjoying art soon after arriving in America because it did not require any language. The activity she enjoyed as a little girl to ease her transition

“Art is the same in any language.”

into a new culture evolved into an educational calling and, hopefully, a career (Figure 8).

Although her identity is more complex than most peoples', Agnes has successfully assimilated into American culture while still retaining pride and traditions from her native country.

Data Analysis:

Many of Agnes's experiences are confirmed in the literature. Although her experiences, of course, diverged in the details, the overall themes in the literature were very consistent with what Agnes and I picked out as main points in her story. No matter what the specific

circumstances, immigrants face extensive changes in their lives that have profound implications for psychological, emotional, and

“Even though I was really young, the experiences still impacted me for the rest of my life.”

identity development (Stodolska, 2003). Monika Stodolska's research also suggests that cultural identity is a complex concept that is influenced by both internal and external factors.

Agnes is a good example of how ethnic identities are constantly changing and evolving based on experiences and beliefs. She grew up with America as part of her family background and hearing about the country from her dad. This made her identity as a Pole different from many of her peers in Poland. Now that she lives in America, she

has incorporated new aspects into her cultural identity.

Agnes is a living example of the historical and current patterns of immigration. Her journey as an immigrant began decades before her birth, when her ancestors made the iconic trip through Ellis Island. Mary Erdmans discusses how the steady immigration and open doors between America and Poland have contributed to the growing Polish communities in the United States. The large population in Chicago has attracted more and more Polish settlers and the numbers show no signs of waning. The large settlement has resulted in a Polish community with a distinct ethnic identity that is not completely Polish and is not completely American (Erdmans, 2000).

Learning a new language is one of the most challenging and noticeable changes that foreigners face after immigrating. The age at which someone immigrates plays a crucial role in defining the rate of language acquisition (Szuber, 2008). This is clearly demonstrated in Agnes's siblings. She remembers her younger brother picking English up much faster than she did and observes that he currently has no accent. Agnes's older brother had a more difficult time learning English and still speaks with a very strong accent, according to Agnes. As the middle child, Agnes was somewhere

between her two brothers in both language acquisition and accent.

The literature strongly supports Agnes's and my conclusion that school is a central issue during the immigration transition. There have been many debates regarding the best way to put immigrants into American schools. Some people advocate total immersion with little special help in English as the best approach. This "sink or swim" method has historically been the most common approach (Coleman, 2004). This method is also the one that Agnes experienced. She was not sequestered in a special class for foreign language or given any special instruction. The only extra help she was given was a weekly ESL (English as a second language) class. Agnes says this was helpful mostly due to the social interaction and the help she received from other students, not the teacher.

This observation supports studies that cite the importance of informal school talk (Roberts, 2001). Informal school talk is the casual conversations among students and the non-academic interchanges between student and teacher. It plays a critical role in understanding the social and academic dimensions of a school. As Agnes became more comfortable with the other students and teachers, she was better able to participate in learning and social settings.

"At some point, you aren't still struggling to assimilate but you're still aware that you're different."

The literature abounds with examples of immigrants facing teachers who do little to ease the transition. Although this clearly

varies by school, Stodolska has recorded many instances of students feeling like they are not being challenged in a way that can help them succeed. Just as Agnes was told by a teacher to draw while the rest of the class learned, other immigrants have also felt pushed aside and channeled into easier classes so teachers do not have to deal with a language barrier. These situations often lead immigrants to doubt their abilities and intelligence (Stodolska, 2008).

The process of building and maintaining identity is a very complex and individual issue. This makes it difficult for academia to dissect and analyze it. One aspect of identity that can be measured is the types of people immigrants become friends with. During social interactions, immigrants tend to seek peers from the same first language background (Szuber, 2008). This fact holds true in Agnes's experience. In the beginning, she was friends with other Polish children because they were the people she could relate to and communicate with. However, even when she became proficient at English, she still gravitated to other Polish Americans. She says she had many more Polish friends all through her childhood (Kubas, interview of 3/1/13). Through her Polish-American childhood friends, she both maintained her Polish identity and developed her American identity.

“College was the first time I had more American friends than Polish friends.”

Slightly contrary to intuition, immigrating is often a way to help immigrants discover characteristics about their native culture. According to Stodolska, transferring into a new culture gives immigrants a chance to analyze the differences and similarities between cultures and decide how those characteristics fit into their lives.

In some ways, however, Agnes's experience does differ from what was reported in the literature. There have been many studies regarding discrimination faced by immigrants coming to America. Piotr Szpunar points out that white immigrants (like Poles) face different kinds of discrimination than immigrants who are of a different ethnic background. They also face more pressure to assimilate quickly because they are assumed to be more like the majority culture of America (Szpunar, 2011). Agnes does not report feeling discriminated against or teased for being Polish. This disparity is likely due to Agnes moving to area in which Polish immigrants and people of Polish heritage are common fixtures of the community.

Agnes's story is a good representation of the kinds of adjustments that Polish, adolescent immigrants face when coming to America. Her struggle with language, schooling, and identity are common themes in children who immigrate to America. However, she feels that her story differs from many of her Polish-American peers. Many immigrant families come to America and begin their life from scratch. In Agnes's case, her family situation made her experience very different. Her dad already had a stable job and was

settled in to the culture. Her grandma was also there to ease the transition of leaving the rest of her extended family behind in Poland.

The other reason Agnes feels her story is different from most Polish immigrants is that the documentation process was not an obstacle. The family history of American citizenship made the process a formality instead of a battle. Agnes reports feeling guilty that her road to citizenship was so easy compared to many of her relatives in Poland who did not have a direct parental link into citizenship.

Conclusions:

This ethnography examined the experience of one Polish immigrant. Agnes and I relied strongly on images to understand what the main issues were and to portray them. Each person's story is unique but all share certain attributes of what it is to be an immigrant. Agnes experienced a life changing event that influenced who she is today and how she thinks of herself.

There are many aspects of the immigrant's experience that are too complex to characterize in research. Each immigrant has a unique background that makes their experience unique. However, researchers can focus on the themes that are common to all immigrants. A study examining the differences in school and language immersions and how successful each is would be enlightening to the field. Another area that deserves further study is the impact of immigration on self-esteem and confidence.

My goal was to learn about Agnes's story and her culture and to figure out the aspects of her experience that are unique to her and which ones are commonly experienced by immigrants. Agnes's story is interesting to hear and could be a lesson to many about the challenges of being an immigrant and assimilating into a new culture. I enjoyed getting to know Agnes because her life experiences so greatly differ from my own.

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