

Poles and italians in detroit



In the late 17th century and early 18th century Detroit was a hotbed for foreign immigration. The booming automobile industry and resulting growth of the city ensured that many jobs were available for those able to take them. Among these immigrants were distinct groups originating from many different countries. Two of these groups were the Poles and the Italians, who arrive to Detroit looking for a new beginning. Although many similarities can be found between the groups there are an equal number of differences, which defined each separate culture. In this paper I'd like to focus on the similarities and differences between the Poles and Italians in Detroit by looking at their reasons for leaving their countries and subsequent arrivals into Detroit, their lifestyles upon moving to Detroit, and the Americanization process that occurred when they arrived.

In my opinion both the Poles and Italians left their homelands not necessarily because they wanted to, but more as a means of survival. Both of these groups suffered from insufficient family incomes due to overpopulation, lack of peasant landholding, and changing world economy. Although they shared these similarities there were also striking differences.

Poland was partitioned among three neighboring empires and disappeared as a state in Europe until after World War I (Global View/Origins/Europe/Poland). Since the Poles were under foreign rule, which left them without a voice in their respective governments and society many, chose to immigrate to Detroit as a means of political relief. Upon arrival to Detroit they occupied the North Eastern side of the city, and because Poles comprised the largest European immigrant group in the metropolis,

(American Cities/Detroit/Poles/Neighborhood/In Streets/Detroit Polish Settlements) they soon occupied Hamtramck as well.

Most who left Italy and moved to Detroit were Southern Italian farmers. As Italy became unified and tied to the world economy, its economy and society changed sharply, (Global View/Origins/Europe/Italy) due to the fact that most Italians used outdated methods of farming which produce insufficient crop when compared to more modernized societies. When they came to Detroit they shared a strong family ties and village obligation which led to most Italians settling together on the East side of Detroit.

To me, it is obvious why these two groups immigrated to Detroit. The Poles were under foreign rule, and had no say in their government. Their departure took place during World War I when the countries that were ruling them also persecuted them because of beliefs and political differences. This is true even today, no person wants to give up his right of free will, and if pressed into this it is much easier to leave for a place where you are free to exercise your own opinions. Likewise Italians were forced to leave as a means to find a source of income. However their emigration rate was the highest among immigrants, which leads me to believe that their reason for leaving was almost purely a matter of money. Which I again can identify with, its very common for people in todays society to switch jobs because it ensures more financial security, even if that job may be undesirable.

One of the most defining characteristics, which separated the Poles and the Italians, were their varied lifestyles while living in Detroit. The major difference when looking at the two appeared in their means of employment.

Most of the Poles in Detroit worked in the automobile or metal industries, and quite a few actually had skilled labor jobs. While some Italians worked in industry their employment tendencies had quite a bit of diversity. Jobs held by Italians included (but were not limited to) unskilled labor in the fields of auto, shipbuilding, and construction. Many were also involved in the pedaling of fruits and vegetables from street side stands.

The jobs that the Poles and Italians held while in Detroit make sense when you consider their background. Before arriving in Detroit Poles were exposed to the industrial explosion in their homeland. This also explains why some Poles had skilled labor jobs while in Detroit. On the other hand the majority of Italians in Detroit were poor farmers in Italy, and since they were now living in a budding metropolis many of the skills they acquired while farming were not applicable in the city. This forced the majority of the Italians to take unskilled labor positions.

Another important difference was what each group considered their top priority while in Detroit. For the first generation Polish immigrant, home ownership was the highest economic priority, (American Cities/Detroit/Poles/Neighborhood/At Home/Thrift and Home Ownership) and often resulted in young boys being pulled out of school to work. In contrast the top priority for Italians seemed to be supporting the families that were left in Italy.

Because the Polish immigrations were more permanent than the Italians it is understandable why a nice home would be important. To many it was and still is a sign of wealth and prosperity. When considering the Italians you must realize that many were supporting families in Italy, and actually

planned on returning which would mean that the home they would be interested in owning would be in a different country.

Finally another difference was the importance of religion. For the Polish, a church is considered the first need of a colony (American Cities/Detroit/Poles/Neighborhood/In Streets/Location of Polish Colonies). Socialization of the Poles started in the church. However the Italians didnt put near as much importance in religion, as is evident in the fact that many more Italian children attended public schools than did the Polish children (who were enrolled in parochial schools.

It is my opinion that the Poles put so much emphasis on their religion because they were persecuted for it in Europe during World War I, and this was their chance to openly worship. It seems that in any time period, people hold on the tightest to the things that are being taken away from them and in this case it was religion.

A major movement in Detroit during the mid-1910s was one to promote the Americanization of all immigrants including the Poles and Italians. Detroiters worried that, settled on racial lines, the immigrants lived apart, came in little contact with Americans, and sustained old customs, traditions, and prejudices (American Cities/Detroit/Italian/Neighborhood/In Streets/Italian Settlements). The Detroit Board of Education through the offering off nighttime English classes pushed this Americanization. The Ford Motor Company also pushed it by offering English classes, American clothes, and the demand of American house keeping.

Although both the Poles and Italians eventually Americanized the time frame in which they did so was different. The Poles took a longer amount of time to act like Americans, when compared to the Italians. I believe there are two reasons why the time frames differed. First, the Polish children were enrolled in parochial schools where they were spoken to in their native tongue. On the other hand most Italian children were enrolled in public schools where they were practically forced to learn English if they wanted to stay in school. The other reason I believe it took the Poles longer to Americanize had to do with the role of the family. Polish children were spoken too in their native language while at home, and forbidden to use English. However, these children were treated very well and loved which made them more willing to take on the roles of their parents when it came to the Polish culture. For Italians it was a different story, the Italian fathers were very domineering which caused rifts between them and their sons. Through the strictness of their rules they caused many of their sons to rebel and to take on the characteristics of Americans just to spite their fathers.

I believe that although Americanization was inevitable, the industrial boom speeded up the process. The Detroit industries encouraged the American way of life because they believed if all of their workers spoke a common language the business would be more efficient. While I tend to agree with the thinking about efficiency, this is just another example of how money makes the world go round. That coupled with the insensitive Italian fathers further pushed the second generation Italians away from the Italian culture and towards the American one.

There were many people who looked upon the immigrants as one huge group without taking the time to notice the sometimes-subtle differences, which defined each ethnicity. If Detroiters would have taken the time to notice these differences they may have found joy in becoming a more cultured person. By taking time to learn about the Polish and Italians reasons for leaving their home lands and subsequent arrivals into Detroit, their lifestyles while in Detroit, and the Americanization process they went through while in Detroit we learn a valuable lesson about the evolution of America. As time goes on I hope it becomes more evident that your ethnic background isnt a tag that defines your role in society, but instead a tool to learn about your ancestors and the strife they went through to make your life a better place.

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