

The Milwaukee Polish

Early history in Milwaukee

Polish immigrants began arriving in the United States in large numbers after the Civil War. The Poles, who quickly grew in numbers to become the second largest European American ethnic group in Milwaukee, were much more consolidated than the more numerous Germans—both in religion and regional practices. Their self-help organizations became their *modus operandi*.

Much of Milwaukee's south side was developed by Poles. Their main commercial districts lined Lincoln Avenue and Mitchell Street, where the Polish language was spoken well into the 1930s.

A literal walk through Milwaukee's Polish history

To feel the influence of the Poles in Milwaukee, let's begin at South Sixth Street and Lincoln Avenue. There you'll be overwhelmed by the majestic presence of the Basilica of St. Josaphat. Look up. Try and visualize

Polish men and women on scaffolding in 1899, building this edifice with their own hands.

Let's go inside. Enter the Basilica at the Pope John Paul II Pavilion on Lincoln Avenue near South Seventh Street. Visitors are welcome on weekdays between 10am and 4pm (and of course for services at other times). Walk through the

pavilion and note all the stained glass windows donated over the years by Milwaukee Poles.

Designed by Erhardt Brielmaier, the basilica features the same architectural elements as St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, including the enormous dome and cross-shaped floor layout. Be prepared to lose your breath as you enter the sanctuary. The interior artwork is as beautiful as any you will find in Rome or Florence. Note the subtle hues of rose and gentle ferns, lagunas, and teals. Walk around. Look up. Read the sacred texts written in Polish.



"The Polish federations. You purchased life insurance from the federation, and the salesman was part of community. They had picnics, dances, programs, Christmas parties. In those days you worked at hard jobs and needed some kind of insurance if something went wrong, so the local fraternal were formed by the Poles. Today some of these fraternal still exist. They still offer insurance and help and still are social organizations."

"The different blends in the city changed the language. Polish changed to reflect 'Mitchell St. Polish'— English words with Polish ends. On Mitchell Street there were so many Jewish vendors. They had Yiddish words, and Poles doing business with them would pick up those words too. When my dad went back to Poland, people didn't understand him."

"The Catholic Church is involved in all parts of our lives. It's life centered on the parish. We had sixteen to eighteen Polish parishes then in the city, and still have several."

"The renovation of Basilica gave area a big shot in the arm. The [Milwaukee] Symphony plays here, Bel Canto Chorus, Warsaw Boys Chorus, Latino groups. Kozy Park has also been a stable influence on the neighborhood. There used to be this idea that the neighborhood was closed to outsiders and that the citadel protected it. Today we see others coming in."

Quotes of Polish informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.

Next, go down to the lower level. There you will find the lower sanctuary, which is also an extraordinary work of art. On the same level you'll see an exhibit of photos and diagrams that tell the full story of how the basilica was originally built and later restored.

When you exit the basilica, cross Lincoln Avenue. Continue west on Lincoln. As you cross Seventh Street you will be at the entrance to Kosciuszko Park, named after the famous Polish Revolutionary War hero, General Thaddeus Kosciuszko. This park was once the center of Polish public life on Milwaukee's old South Side and is still used for major Milwaukee Polish events.

Before you continue west, look across the street. There you will see the lovely Old South Side Settlement Museum. The museum tells the story

of the history of the neighborhood and many of the celebrated people that one lived here. It is open free to the public the first Saturday of each month, 2-4pm.



Continue walking west for several blocks until you arrive at Kosciuszko Monument Square. Here you will see the newly restored statue of the General. In 1905, over



60,000 Poles attended the original dedication of the monument. The square and the monument were restored during the second decade of the 21st century. The restoration committee was led by the organization Polanki and included neighborhood residents and other Polish organizations and citizens.

Read the inscriptions, and then sit for a moment and enjoy the view.

"Save for the basilica, I don't know of a single event that was as important as the installation of the Kosciuszko Monument in the park named after him. Over 60,000 Poles came out when it was unveiled. The park has always been the lightning rod for Polish activities in Milwaukee."

"Today our original neighborhood has its own museum. But back then we were considered stupid, like, 'How many Polacks does it take to screw in a light bulb?' kind of thing. The other thing was that people said they heard we were dirty, when we probably kept the cleanest properties in the city."

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After your stop, continue west on West Lincoln Avenue. Note the interesting architectural styles of the commercial buildings. Atop their roofs you will see curly and angular parapets. This style was brought to Milwaukee by the Poles of northern Poland.

When you reach South Eleventh Street, cross the street and walk one block south. There you will encounter the Holy Name of Jesus Church. This is a Polish National Catholic Church that keeps most Catholic traditions but is governed by its own synod. This church was consecrated by the south side Poles in 1917 and is still attended by many local Polish Americans.

Getting a little hungry? You can finish your tour of Polish history by returning to Lincoln Avenue and walking one block west. There you will find the A&J Polish Deli. This is perhaps the last commercial estab-



ishment in Milwaukee where you will find most signage in the Polish language. Enjoy a lunch or a snack!



Meet some of your past Polish neighbors

These include a movie star, two baseball hall-of-famers, and a Medal of Honor recipient.

Marianna Michalska (Gilda Gray¹)

Born in Krakow, Poland to parents Max and Wanda Michalska in 1901, Marianna immigrated to the United States in 1907 with her family. The Michalskas quickly found a home on today's South 15th Street and later moved to South 12th.

At a young age, Marianna married her neighbor, John Gorecki, son of Socialist and union leader, Martin Gorecki. Although John

"We have a Polish National Church here. It has a lay board of trustees that sets policy, as opposed to the priests. They don't recognize the Pope. Priests can get married. Doctrinally they're the same as Catholic. We have one here [in Milwaukee] and one on West Allis and in Chicago."

"We used to have live chickens in the back yard in coops and we would select one chicken to provide the soup. We used to feed chickens well. When we cooked a chicken in the old days, we'd get a good yellow grease on top. That provided the flavor. Today there's less fat, so it's salted to add flavor. We didn't have to salt then. The flavor was in the bird."

"There was the election of the Pope and the Solidarity movement in Poland, and that gave a big boost to our community. The [Leonardo da Vinci and the] Art of Poland art exhibit here was big. People can say, 'We really are important.' The Polish here have had an inferiority complex. It's important to have the outside world notice, like with Walensa and [the] Nobel Peace Prize."

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worked as a pattern maker while in the neighborhood, he was also becoming an accomplished musician and became a concert violinist. The couple had one child, Martin. When Marianna and John moved to New York to pursue John's career, young Martin stayed behind with her parents.

Although Marianna and John eventually divorced, Marianna may have been influenced by her performer husband. She became a dancer and is said to have introduced the shimmy to American audiences in 1919.

While her marriage was breaking up, Marianna moved to Chicago, where she was discovered by talent agent Frank Westphal, the husband of Sophie Tucker. It was Tucker who convinced Marianna to change her name—which eventually became Gilda Gray. She succeeded as a vaudeville performer and married a second time to Gil Boag.

The couple moved to Hollywood where Gilda Gray's vaudeville act gained additional recognition. By the mid-1920s she made several movies—all of which included her famous shimmy.

After the stock market crash of 1929, Gilda lost most of her assets, and returned to New York. There she worked as a dancer at the Palace Theater. During World War Two she raised money for Poland and brought six Polish citizens to America during the Cold War era. Recognizing her great contributions, Ralph Edwards dedicated a *This is Your Life* show to Gilda in 1953.

Son Marin Gorecki, who had remained in Milwaukee on South 8th Street during his childhood, was greatly influenced by his musical parents. He went on to become a big band maestro as an adult, under the name of Martin Gray.



Aloisius Szymanski (a.k.a. Al Simmons)

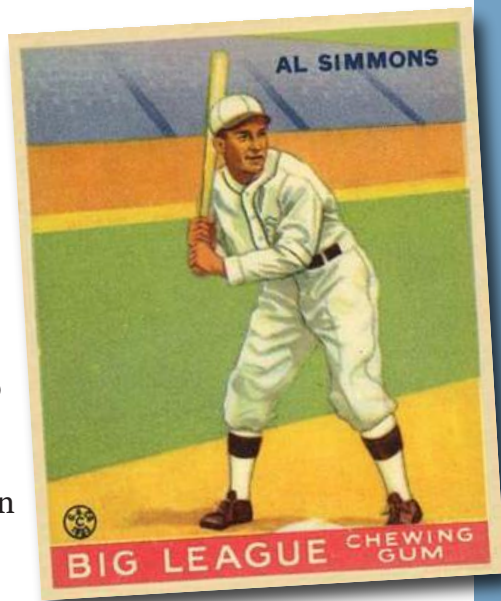
The son of Polish immigrants, Aloisius (“Al”) Szymanski (see photoⁱⁱ) grew up in the Historic Mitchell Street neighborhood. His family home throughout his life was at 1972 South 15th Place (previously American Avenue). Born in 1903, he was probably a fan of the sandlot darlings of the Old South Side, the Kosciuszko Reds. The Reds operated between 1909 and 1919 and drew thousands to their games. They won four championships during their decade in the City and Lake Shore Leagues. In the 4th grade, Al was spanked by his father because he insisted that he wanted to grow up to be a professional baseball player. His father eventually yielded, telling him he’d better become a great player. Aloisius Szymanski complied.

Al perfected his hitting skills and was signed to a contract in the minor leagues. When he found people having difficulty pronouncing his last name he modified it to Simmons. He was called up to the Philadelphia Athletics in 1954 and very quickly became a star. Simmons led the A’s to the American League Pennant in 1929-- followed by the World Series, where the A’s defeated the Chicago Cubs.

Simmons married Doris Lynn Reader in 1934. The couple had one child.

Playing for the Athletics, Braves, White Sox, Tigers, Reds, and Senators throughout his career, Simmons remained a star. He completed his playing days with a phenomenal lifetime batting average of .334, became the American League batting champion twice, and was inducted into the Major League Hall of Fame in 1953.

Throughout his life Milwaukee remained Al’s home. Working as a coach after his playing days had ended, he returned to Milwaukee following a heart attack. Three years later, in 1956, he died in his hometown at age 53. He was interred at St. Adalbert’s Cemetery.

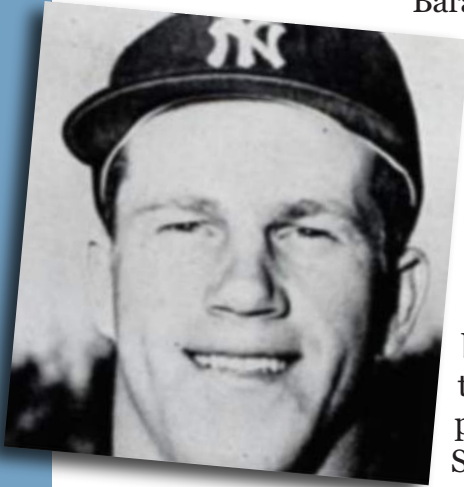


Tony Kubekⁱⁱⁱ

Anthony Christopher Kubek Jr. was born in 1936 and grew up in a rented house at the corner of 5th Place and Harrison Avenue, in today's Lincoln Village neighborhood, one block west of Baran Park. He was the grandson of Polish immigrants and the son of Anthony Kubek Sr., a laborer, and Jennie Kubek (nee Oleniczak), a homemaker. Both Tony Sr. and Jennie had also grown up within blocks of their 5th Place address.

Like most other Polish kids in the area, Tony Jr. grew up playing baseball, probably at Kosciuszko Park in his early years, and no doubt at

Baran Park when this was completed in Tony's teens. Like his neighborhood peers, Tony became an avid fan of the Milwaukee Braves when they arrived in town in the early 1950s.



Tony was a particularly talented shortstop. He caught the attention of the New York Yankee organization and was signed to a major league contract. He was brought up to the majors in 1957-- curiously, the same year the Milwaukee Braves won the pennant and went on to compete in the World Series, against none other than the New York Yankees. And how did Tony Kubek do against

his beloved hometown team? He had one of the best World Series games a rookie ever had, going 3 for 5 with 2 home runs, 3 runs scored, and 4 RBI. Fortunately for Milwaukee, the Braves did win the Series in 7 games.

Kubek took Rookie of the Year honors that year, and went on to play for the Yankees through the 1965 season. He became an All-Star four times.

When Kubek's playing days were over, he advanced to a career in broadcasting. Between 1968 and 1989, he broadcast 12 World Series and 14 League Championships for NBC television. He is a recipient of the Ford C. Frick Award of the Baseball Broadcasters' Hall of Fame.

Robert J. Modrzejewsk^{iv}

In the 1940s, Robert J. Modrzejewski grew up in the Lincoln Village neighborhood, at 2431 South 9th Street, possibly just around the corner from Gilda Gray's childhood home. Like most children on his block, if weather permitted, he walked the few blocks to Cleveland Park between 10th and 11th Streets in today's Polonia neighborhood to play softball or baseball—both sports being extremely popular on the Old South Side.

Robert was the fifth child of parents Joseph J. and Rose S. Modrzejewski (nee Tarkowski), both immigrants from Poland. Among Roberts' siblings were sisters Dolores, Esther, and Adeline, and brother Arthur. As a child, Robert's maternal grandfather, Ignatz Tarkowski, and uncle Frank Tarkowski lived in his household. The father Joseph worked as a machinist for the U.S., Chicago and North Western Railroad. Like virtually all families in this Polish neighborhood, Robert's was Roman Catholic.



In 1953, Robert graduated from Casimir Pulaski High School. He later attended Wisconsin State Teachers College and the University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee, where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Education.

While at UW-M, Robert became a member of the Platoon Leaders Class that led to his being commissioned as a Marine Corps Reserve second lieutenant upon graduation in 1957. By 1960 he had been integrated into the Regular Marine Corps.

Robert was ordered to the West Coast and then to the Republic of Vietnam. In Vietnam, he assumed duty as Commanding Officer of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. During these years Robert J. Modrzejewski distinguished himself above and beyond the call of duty—for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor. He and another Marine, John J. McGinty III, were presented the Medals of Honor on March 12, 1968 by President Lyndon Johnson.

Modrzejewski retired from the military in 1986. In an official ceremony in July 2004, the City of Milwaukee renamed Robert's old haunt, Cleveland Park, to Modrzejewski Playground. Today with fewer than 20 percent of the Lincoln Village residents still being Polish, many have trouble with the pronunciation and affectionately refer to the playground as "Mod Park."

Recent history

While about 20 percent of the residents that live along the path you have just traveled are still Polish, most of the Poles began moving out of the neighborhood in the 1960s when the freeway took much of the eastern section of the neighborhood, creating housing shortages. Many moved into the southern suburbs.

Today, one of the best place to experience Polish culture in Milwaukee County is at the Polish Center of Wisconsin in Franklin (6941 South Sixty-

Eight Street). This extraordinary building was built in the style of a Polish manor house and overlooks a beautiful spring-fed lake in a natural wooded setting.

Polish events at this center are diverse and well-attended.



They include concerts, bingo games, weddings, beer and vodka tasting events, special art exhibits, a pierogi festival, workshops, classes, and dedications. For specific descriptions and times of events, check out the center's website at polishcenterofwisconsin.org.

But Milwaukee's Southside roots have not been forgotten. The Wisconsin Poles still return to the Basilica of St. Josaphat and to Kosciuszko Park for important ethnic events such as Polish Constitution Day and holiday rituals such as concerts, Easter services, and dedications.



"[When the Poles were moving out] Hispanics were coming in. The expressway was built in the 1950s and 1960s and it took a lot of homes. It took older homes. They [the Poles] wanted to stay but there were no homes available. When some had to leave then others followed."

"Everything changed in the '70s. That era changed the way we looked at things. You know, 'Don't trust anyone over 30.' It pulled the young away from seniors and they did not socialize with older people anymore. That's where traditions ended. The Polish center and ethnic festivals had a lot to do with restoring some of this."

Quotes of Polish informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.





“Polish Constitution Day is May 3. It’s about when the first Polish constitution was ratified in 1791. One of the organizations usually plans a procession at some auspicious place, like the monument to General Kosciuszko. The procession can be miles long or just a few blocks, depending on the era or the resources. Most of the time there is some kind of Polish band, a lot of banners and flags, people in Polish dress, and a really large group of people.”

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Meet one of your current Polish neighbors

Dennis Lukaszewski

It's hard to enter a Milwaukee neighborhood where at least some residents don't recognize Dennis Lukaszewski. Raised in the neighborhood of the above walk—Lincoln Village—his dedication to his Polish roots there made him keenly aware of the importance of heritage to all Milwaukee groups. He takes that passion to his life's mission— developing community gardens and educational sites.

“Having had a bias for Polish culture,” Dennis states, “I have been more aware of the many other ethnic groups I interact with at each garden site and try to accommodate their special heritage needs to help them continue their traditions in the community gardens.”

Dennis Lukaszewski heads up Milwaukee County's Community Gardens' initiative. Going miles beyond his job descriptions at UWEx's Urban Agricultural Program, Lukaszewski and his staff currently serve 540 gardening families growing food and flowers on over 100 acres of land and trains nearly 100 people a year in its Beekeeper Certification Program. These efforts bring communities together, build green careers, allow people to grow food and occupy acreage that consolidates ethnic aims, increase the disposable income of families, and encourage healthy eating. Lukaszewski and staff also work with partners such as the Gerald Ignace Health Center, Milwaukee Homeless Vet Services, Office for Persons with Disabilities, Medical College of Wisconsin, and Wisconsin House of Corrections inmates to promote gardening as healing therapy.

While growing up, Lukaszewski attended St. John Kanty Catholic School and Notre Dame High on the city's old South Side and worshipped at the Basilica of St. Josaphat—all strongly Polish venues. He received a bachelor's degree from UW- Milwaukee studying the biological aspects of conservation and a master's at Marquette in education and marketing. Along the way, he married Barbara and had three daughters Lisa, Sandy, and Angela, and four grandchildren, nearly all of whom participated over the years in Polish dance groups.

Dennis' wife Barbara was not Polish. “Events like the International Folk Fair always provided the opportunity to get our kids involved in her German mix as well as my ‘Polishishness,’” to which he adds, “My kids still identify with their Polish heritage however.”



Although Lukaszewski does attend local Polish events such as Polish Fest, his “Polishishness” now comes down to mostly food. “Unfortunately, we do not have many Polish restaurants locally, but when possible in other Midwestern cities, I enjoy having the opportunity to sample their food. What’s not to like about kielbasa?”

In the past the Lukaszewski family participated in a lot of seasonal Polish activities with the parishes, which had a strong Polish membership. He discovered he also used some Polish gardening traditions. “These might be Lukaszewski family gardening traditions,” he qualified. He claims he is still not sure why his elders put amaranth in sweet vermouth. “No one seems to recall that except me.”

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ⁱⁱ Photo attribution: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/94/AlSimmonsGoudeycard.jpg>

ⁱⁱⁱ Photo attribution: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c2/Tony_Kubek_1961.png

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