

Polish Ethnic Schools in Rio Grande do Sul (1875–1938)

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Researching about the school process among Polish immigrants, we found that, in Rio Grande do Sul, there was an education system with the typical characteristics of the Polish culture. According to the school census of Polish immigration in Brazil – held by the Polish Consulate in Curitiba – up to 1937, 128 ethnic schools with 4,560 students and 114 teachers were organized in Rio Grande do Sul. The schools, that were created based on the cultural characteristics of the Polish immigrants, such as language, religion and customs, were associated to the effort of building colonial centers, usually called communities. In cultural history, which is a reading reference of the teaching process, emphasis is given to the numerous aspects that involve the rebuilding of the past in a narrative, to the care and to the treatment of the sources..

Key words: *Polish Ethnic Schools; Polish Immigration; School; Culture;Brazil; Rio Grande de Sul*

Initial Considerations

This article aims to present the partial results of the research on the Polish ethnic schools in Rio Grande do Sul. The time frame contemplates the formation of the first nucleus of Polish immigrants, in 1875, up to the compulsory nationalization of education, in 1938, drawing attention to the process of identity and cultural formation of the ethnic schools of these immigrants in the state.

We emphasize that we understand the concept of *culture* and *ethnic identity* in the perspective of a process. For Hall (2006), the post-modern conception of identity is a “mobile celebration” formed and transformed continuously, being defined historically, that is, “the subject takes on different identities at different moments”.¹ Kreutz (2003), on his turn,

¹ Hall, S. (2006). *A identidade Cultural na Pós-modernidade*.(2006) Tradução de Tomaz Tadeu da Silva e Guacira Lopes Louro. 11. ed. Rio de Janeiro: DPeA Editora.

states that *culture* and *identity* can not be thought of as a given product or as a closed system, but as a dynamic element that aggregates meanings which are not fixed, understood as a process. Reality then starts to be built from the symbolic.

In this context, ethnicity itself also starts to be understood as a process. Poutignant and Streiff-Fenart (1998)² assert that *ethnicity* is not a biological quality, acquired from birth, but it is a continuous process of construction/reconstruction, that requires being expressed and validated in the social interaction. There are no categories, *a priori*, which define that an individual belongs to this or to that group. What distinguishes one social group from another are the perceptions that each group has of itself in the social interaction. Hannerz (1997) ponders that the limits of the interethnic *borders* in the world are drawn by experience from the perspective of the multiple identity and cultural processes, without being, often, based on the subjection of individuals in a fixed and stable order.

In this sense, "the freedom of the border area is explored more creatively by situational displacements and innovative combinations, organizing their resources in new ways, experimenting. In border areas, there is room for action in the handling of culture".³ Therefore, the ethnic school process is formed in the dialogic interaction that a particular group has of itself and by the awareness of what is characteristic of its identity and cultural process.

In the case of the research in question, it is about an identity process whose setting is the conditions of rural centers with a significant number of Polish immigrants. The formation of the first nucleus of Polish immigration in Rio Grande do Sul was in 1875, when 26 families that came from the north of Poland settled in Colônia Conde D'Eu (now, the city of Carlos Barbosa). However, its greatest expansion took place in the last decade of the nineteenth century, with the so-called "Brazilian fever", when many immigrants, influenced by the propaganda of shipping companies and by incentives, such as the payment of the maritime ticket from European ports, decided to emigrate to Brazil.

In the references to the number of Polish immigrants who came to Brazil and to Rio Grande do Sul, there is not a reliable official statistics for the nationality denomination brought by the immigrants many times referred to the countries that occupied the Polish territory in that historical

² Poutignant, Ph. – Streiff-Fenart, J. (1998). *As teorias da Etnicidade*. São Paulo: Fundação Editora da UNESP.

³ Hannerz, U. (1997). Fluxos, fronteiras, híbridos: palavras-chave da antropologia transnacional. In: *Mana – Estudos de Antropologia Social*. Rio de Janeiro: PPGAS – Museu Nacional – UFRJ v. 3, n. 1, pp. 7–39.

period. In this sense, the statistics show numbers of Russian, Austrian and Prussian immigrants, as previously mentioned.

Certainly, much of this number of immigrants, classified under these nationalities, in fact, was of Polish immigrants, either by conviction and/or by ethnic belonging. According to estimates made in the early twenties, approximately 102,196 Poles arrived in Brazil. Of these, according to Gardolinski (1958)⁴, about 27,000 came to Rio Grande do Sul. However, it is estimated that this number was higher due to the fact that the passports of many immigrants referred to the countries that occupied the Polish territory.

Following, we present a brief report on the educational situation of the Polish immigrants coming from territories occupied by Prussia, Russia and Austria, what helps us to understand the representations the school had in the imaginary of the Polish immigrants when they came to Rio Grande do Sul.

School Process among Polish Immigrants in Rio Grande do Sul

When the Poles arrived in Brazil, due to the difficulties with the language and to the isolation in the colonial settlements where they were installed, the interaction of the Poles with other immigrant groups was difficult. They went through constant displacements, often far from villages and regions where they could sell their surplus production. As the third major group of immigrants to arrive, after the Germans and the Italians, they were assigned the most remote and difficult to reach locations in Rio Grande do Sul. It is possible to state that the Polish immigrants occupied colonial lots in four distinct regions, where communities and schools were formed.

The first region of Polish immigration is located between the coast and the mountains southeast of the state. It comprises the cities of Rio Grande, Pelotas, Dom Feliciano, Mariana Pimentel, Camaquã, Barão do Triunfo, Santo Antônio da Patrulha and Porto Alegre.

The second region is located in the Serra Gaúcha, comprising the municipalities of São Marcos, Antônio Prado, Veranópolis, Santa Teresa, Santa Bárbara, Bento Gonçalves, Guaporé, Casca, Nova Prata, Nova Roma do Sul, Vista Alegre do Prata and surroundings.

The third region, formed by the localities called Colônias Novas, also made up of individuals who migrated from the highlands region, is

⁴ Gardolinski, E. (1958). *Imigração e colonização polonesa*. In: Becker, K. (Ed.). *Enciclopédia Rio-grandense*. Canoas: Regional, v. 5, pp. 3–114.

located north of the state, comprising the Planalto and the Vale do Uruguai, in the municipalities of Erechim, Getúlio Vargas, Gaurama, Carlos Gomes (Nova Polônia), Dourado, Balisa, Marcelino Ramos, Áurea, Lajeado Valeriano, Barão do Cotegipe, Centenário, Aratiba, Capoeiré, Iraí and Frederico Westphalen, among other smaller towns.

The fourth region of Polish immigrants is located in the Missions, also called “Colônias Novas”, comprising Santo Ângelo, Ijuí, Santa Rosa, Guarani das Missões, Três de Maio, Tucunduva and surroundings.

According to Gardolinski (1958, p 21)⁵, chronologically, the occupation in the periods with the highest number of immigrants in the colonial areas in the State follows this circuit:

- 1886: Santa Barbara and Santa Tereza (Bento Gonçalves).
- 1890–1894: Veranópolis, Nova Virgínia, Nova Bassano, Monte Vêneto, Nova Roma do Sul, Nova Prata, Antônio Prado, São Marcos, Santo Antônio da Patrulha, Casca, Guaporé, Ernesto Alves, Dom Feliciano, Mariana Pimentel, São Jerônimo, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande, Jaguari, Ijuí, Guarani das Missões.
- 1911–1913: Guarani das Missões and region, Erechim and region.

When it comes to Polish schools in Rio Grande do Sul, the work “Escolas da Colonização Polonesa no Rio Grande do Sul”, Gardolinski (1977), is the main reference as a data source. It is one of the few studies that deal with this subject in Rio Grande do Sul.

Renk (2009)⁶, researching particularly the education system among Polish and Ukrainian immigrants in Paraná, points out that the schools were characterized by teaching knowledge in the native language of the group and that very few colonies did not have an ethnic school. Due to the need they felt for greater interaction with each other and motivated by the religious factor, they began to build chapels, schools and halls to life in society, whenever possible.

With the emergence of the first associations, in some colonial settlements, the children studied in houses that could hold a rudimentary classroom, attended by teachers selected in their own community, chosen among those who presented some education or domain of the minimum knowledge needed for teaching. According to Gardolinski

⁵ Gardolinski, E. (1958). Imigração e colonização polonesa. In: Becker, K. (Ed.). *Enciclopédia Rio-grandense*. Canoas: Regional, v. 5, pp. 3–114.

⁶ Renk, V. E. (2009). *Aprendi falar português na escola! O processo de nacionalização das escolas étnicas polonesas e ucranianas no Paraná*. Curitiba: UFPR. 241f. *Tese de Doutorado em Educação. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação*. Universidade Federal do Paraná.

(1977) as soon as they built the church in conjunction with the seat of the association, they also built a school. At first, the basics of writing, reading and calculations, the history of Poland, besides geography and arts, were taught in Polish.

Reportedly, one of the first ethnic schools of Polish immigration in Rio Grande do Sul, was established in 1897, and was maintained by Sociedade Concórdia in Porto Alegre. To date, it has been possible to report a total of 128 Polish ethnic schools located in different regions and colonial centers of the state.

Such ethnic schools, over time, were multiplied along with the existing communities. In the early years, they taught only in Polish. Later, they began to also teach in the vernacular, as they grew interested in having their children learning Portuguese to be inserted more appropriately in the national context and also to meet the requirements imposed by the government in the process of nationalization of education.

Most Polish schools were community schools maintained by the settlers themselves, through monthly payments made by the students themselves, with money or with basic staple food, passed directly to the teacher. As Luporini notes (2011), “the Poles who immigrated to Brazil were mostly laborers. What is striking is the fact that they were able to create a network of schools and teachers.”⁷

The schools of the Polish immigrants were of two types: laic schools and/or confessional schools. In laic schools, after the creation of the association, communities built schools or offered space for teaching. They would be responsible for the purchase of the furniture and the teaching material and also for the teachers' payment. In the beginning, they did not have any kind of government assistance, but in later years, some schools began to receive some subsidy from the state government or from municipalities for the payment of teachers.

Confessional schools, in turn, were linked to religious congregations that charged the students a monthly payment and were maintained and run by nuns or by Catholic priests. From 1920 on – with Poland, as an independent state, in the post-war Europe scenario – the colonial centers of Polish immigrants in Rio Grande do Sul and in other states began to receive follow-up through the Polish consulate in Curitiba, which would send teachers and textbooks.

The Polish schools were linked to two associations of these immigrants: *Kultura* and *Oswiata*. *Kultura* had a laic and liberal orientation

⁷ Luporini, T. J. (2011). Educação Polonesa: os fundamentos da Educação Escolar étnica Revisitados. In Luchese, T. A. In Kreutz, L. (Ed.) *Imigração e Educação no Brasil: Histórias, Processos e Práticas Escolares*. Santa Maria: Editora UFSM. pp. 165–190.

and brought together the Association of Teachers of Private Polish Schools in Brazil. In Rio Grande do Sul, according to the census conducted by the Polish consul Kasimierz Gluchowski (2005)⁸, still in 1924, there were 22 Kultura schools.

Oswiata, which means Education, had only 6 schools throughout the state. These schools had a confessional orientation, usually linked to Catholic nuns and priests, and brought together the Association of Teachers of the Christian Polish Schools. Also according to Gluchowski's census (2005), there were also 20 schools so-called isolated which did not have any affiliation.

According to the school census of Polish immigration in Brazil, held by the Consulate of Poland in Curitiba, on the eve of the Nationalization of education in 1938, there were 128 ethnic Polish schools with 4560 students in Rio Grande do Sul, where 114 teachers taught. Out of these schools, 117 had bilingual education (Portuguese and Polish), 10 had education in Portuguese and one had education only in Polish. Still in connection with these schools, 19 were temporarily closed for lack of teachers and 3 were being organized, making a total of 106 schools in activity.

In Brazil, this number, according to Malczewski⁹, without counting the schools closed, was of 330 schools, with 293 laic schools and 37 confessional schools, mainly concentrated in the state of Paraná. In these schools, 287 teachers taught a total of 9,316 children, regularly enrolled until 1937–1938.

Final Considerations

To research the school process among Polish immigrants in Rio Grande do Sul is a stimulating task, while complex, because it implies the search for dispersed and/or lost sources. This requires more attention – with regard to small signs, traces, memories, remnants of significations and meanings that the immigrants were leaving behind – to gather them, little by little, and to form the *corpus of research*.

The Polish immigrants had only a distant notion of an ethnic school tradition through the family tradition of their ancestors, because they were under the rule of foreign powers without any interest in their cultural specificities. For this reason, it is important to emphasize that, notwithstanding the unfavorable environment, they resorted to a home

⁸ Gluchowski, K. (2005). *Os poloneses no Brasil*. Porto Alegre: Editora Rodycz & Ordakowski.

⁹ Malczewski, Z. (1998). *A presença dos poloneses e da Comunidade Polônica no Rio de Janeiro*. Varsóvia: CESLA.

practice of teaching reading and writing – even though rudimentary – which was mainly given by mothers and grandmothers. Here we have the adherence to cultural values propagated in the region in previous periods, when Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians lived in political and cultural freedom. This practice continued in the families of this group of immigrants in its initial phase in Rio Grande do Sul, when they had not yet established their ethnic schools and were distant from the availability of public schools.

It is also important to note that the Polish immigrants were the third largest group of immigrants to come to Rio Grande do Sul which constituted more homogeneous communities. Differently from the previous ethnic groups, initially they had access to land in locations that rendered it difficult to form community organizations, whether due to the distance between them or to their dispersion among the residents of other ethnic groups, as pointed out above. But from the moment they met favorable conditions, they did not hesitate to build community structures in their rural centers that would promote integration, in special schools, association halls and chapels.

The Polish ethnic schools were able to play their role in the educational action of their children and even, in some cases, of children that descended from other nationalities. However, they were not able to reach all children of school age in the colonies, because there were no resources to maintain the schools, such as teaching material and teachers. In some cases, there were also disagreements of ideological character, reflecting on the community organizations.

It must also be emphasized that, in many families, children began to work very early, with school attendance being left behind. Many children even began to study, but soon left school because they needed to work at home, on the farm. In reports of alumni and in documents, there are also references to the teachers' salaries paid by the communities. As also found in other ethnic groups, among the Polish immigrants, the salary paid to the teacher was insignificant, so they needed to perform other activities to earn their living.

In the precarious conditions of survival, the investment in education by the settlers was very small. Gluchowski (2005) corroborates that, stating that it was very difficult to convince the settlers to send their children to school and bear the cost of the monthly payment, "a lot of energy is needed to explain the settler that higher contributions in favor of the schools are indispensable, that it is necessary to have a greater zeal to send children to schools in places where they already function."¹⁰

¹⁰ Gluchowski, K. (2005). *Os poloneses no Brasil*. Porto Alegre: Editora Rodycz & Ordakowski.

In some localities with a higher population density, there was the availability of public schools and in these situations, the Polish immigrants sent their children to study. Another aspect that deserves attention: on the eve of the process of nationalization of education in 1938, out of the 128 Polish ethnic schools in operation in the state, more than 90% of them worked with bilingual education, what demonstrates the great interest of this immigrant group to integrate itself in the national culture.

In this sense, the school process of the Polish ethnic schools had its own development, with the cultural characteristics brought by the immigrants from the occupied territories, adding to the new context of colonization in Rio Grande do Sul through constant adjustments and readjustments.

Ultimately, the sources examined make it possible to conclude that, effectively, there was an ethnic school process – among Polish immigrants in Rio Grande do Sul, from 1897 to 1938 – interrupted by the compulsory nationalization of education promoted by the Estado Novo in Brazil by Decree Law 406 of 1938. This experience lingers in the memory of many descendants of immigrants who experienced this ethnic school process.

The process of organization of the education system emphasizes how important these schools were to Polish immigrants and their descendants. The closing of the schools generated exasperated tempers and conflicts, during the Nationalization Campaign promoted by the Estado Novo, where ethnic schools were prohibited and closed without being adequately replaced, in many cases, by public schools, leaving part of this immigrant group without schools. As we have seen previously, although in a different context to that of the time of the nineteenth century dominations, the Poles were again without their ethnic schools, which were important for the development of the cultural-identity process, besides being important for the insertion of these immigrants and their descendants in the Brazilian National Culture.