

Culture crash

Growing up Polish-American in Chicago means marching in parades, learning the language—and facing disapproving grandmas.

By **Gretchen Kalwinski**

On Christmas Eve during my freshman year of high school, I entered my family's traditional Polish celebration proudly sporting a new perm and Gap outfit. My Polish *babcia* (grandma) looked at me sadly and muttered, "You don't look like a Polish girl anymore."

My grandma, who met my grandfather in a post-World War II relocation camp before immigrating to Chicago, had grounds for her disappointment, though I started out as a good Polish girl. Saturday Polish school was a fixture of my childhood: I enrolled when I was seven and studied language, culture, song and dance and marched in Chicago's Polish Constitution Day Parade wearing the traditional folk costume—this was the image of me Babcia preferred. But I craved acceptance among classmates and longed for all-American Wonder Bread and Esprit bags. After several years, I quit Polish school and went back to cartoons on Saturdays.

Many who grew up with family from the old country have similar stories about struggling to straddle two cultures—in Chicago, a city chock-full of Poles, I'm in especially good company. Norwood Park's Eva Penar was completely immersed in Polish culture from birth. Though Penar, 31, was born in Chicago, she and her

Polish-born family spoke the mother tongue at home (she's fluent and has worked as a translator). In addition to Polish school on Saturdays, she also spent the day at Polish mass and Polish Scouts (which she describes as "like Girl Scouts, but more hard-core"), where she learned Morse code, survival tactics and camping skills. Today, she considers herself both Polish and American: "I define *American* as having richness in your culture."

Bob Kordalewski, 32, of Arlington Heights, started Scouts at age three and stayed on long enough to meet his wife there in his early twenties. Now, their kids are in Scouts and Polish school, and he and his wife speak Polish to clerks and each other (especially when they don't want people to know what they're saying).

Knowing the language seems the defining line between identifying as Polish or American. For Penar, speaking fluent Polish made Polish school pay off, though she remembers grousing about missing *The Smurfs* to go to class. "Now, I can't quote *Smurfs*, but I speak a second language," she says.

For my part, because I've forgotten what little Polish I knew, the language barrier prevents me from getting Poles to see me as one of their own—I'm just another American. My integration was successful, but at a cost: I'm limited to simply enjoying pierogi with other Americans. It's a painfully small consolation to be an expert in the antics of Gargamel and Smurfette.

Watch TOC's production manager, Cheryl Magiera, spoof her Polish heritage with a polka workout at timeoutchicago.com/polish.



COSTUME NATIONAL
Reluctant Polish-school student Gretchen Kalwinski, right, poses in full regalia with her brother Bill and sister Lara.



BADGE OF HONOR
Eva Penar, right, learned Morse code and survival skills in Polish Scouts.

'SKI REPORT

Old-school Polish hangouts offer a comforting taste of home, but young Poles favor cooler, fresher, babushka-free joints.

	DELI	ART GALLERY	THEATER	BAKERY	DIVE
OLD	Bobak's (5275 S Archer Ave, 773-735-5334, bobak.com) is known for its huge variety of grocery and deli items, and for Pope John Paul II's 1979 visit.	Maya Polsky Gallery (215 W Superior St, 312-440-0055, mayapolskygallery.com) made its name by representing painter Ed Paschke before his death.	In the 1890s, St. Stanislaus Kostka Church (1300 N Noble St, 773-278-2470) was known as a Tiffany-chandeliered hub of the Polish community, doubling as a venue for dramas like <i>Jadwiga</i> , <i>Queen of Poland</i> . Now, it operates only as a church.	Pre-gentrification, Wicker Park's Alliance Bakery (1736 W Division St, 773-278-0366, alliance-bakery.com) was the place for still-warm rye bread and <i>sekacz</i> , a layered tea cake. Now, it doles out cakes and espresso and only a few Polish items like <i>kolacky</i> . Sigh.	Zakopane (1734 W Division St, 773-486-1559, polkaholics.com/lounge.htm) used to open in the wee hours for the night-shift workers.
NEW	Andy's Deli (5442 N Milwaukee Ave, 773-631-7304, andysdeli.com) offers a variety of hot and cold prepared foods (pickled salads, luscious sausages), plus café seating and imported groceries. It's the Eastern European Fox & Obel.	Polish Museum of America (984 N Milwaukee Ave, 773-384-3352, polishmuseumofamerica.org) curator Monika Nowak presents exhibitions like "Pressing Matter" (March 26), featuring graphic artists considered the future of Polish printmaking.	Chopin Theatre (1543 W Division St, 773-278-1515, chopintheatre.com), owned by Polish émigré Zygmunt Dyrkacz and his wife, Lela Headd, houses avant-garde international theatrical productions (some of which are Polish).	Jefferson Park's Delightful Pastries (5927 W Lawrence Ave, 773-545-7215, delightfulpastries.com) specializes in <i>paczki</i> and tarts, selling its delicious wares at the Green City Market.	Zakopane . What's old is new again, and this 20-year-old bar (which now opens at 7 am) swarms with hipsters and fratties. Beware: The bartender has zero qualms about hitting on your boyfriend right in front of you.—GK