



MIKOŁAJ RADOMSKI

Mieczysław Waszczuk
in his private museum in
the Brazilian interior,
near Áurea

POLISH FOOTPRINTS IN BRAZILIAN SOIL

The cultural heritage of the sizeable Polish diaspora in Brazil is being painstakingly preserved in a variety of dedicated museums. These grassroots initiatives celebrate the enduring connection between history, memory, and identity across continents and generations.

Mikołaj Radomski

Museum of Pomeranian Folk Culture in Swołowo

There are currently between 1.5 and 3 million people of Polish ancestry living in Brazil. Most of them reside in the country's southern part, where their forebears began to arrive more than 150 years ago. The influx of Poles came in several waves, most notably during the periods of so-called "Brazilian fever" which took place in 1890–1892 in the area of the Russian-occupied lands of the Kingdom of Poland, 1895–1897 in the Austrian-occupied Eastern Galicia, and 1911–1912 in the regions of Chełm and Lublin. This migration was driven by the search for work and land for settlement, drawing mainly smallholders, landless peasants, rural laborers, some rural craftsmen, as well as some minor officials and teachers from post-feudal Polish villages. Many were swayed by the propaganda spread by shipping and emigration agents working for the Brazilian government, lured by promises of prosperity and plentiful free land, prompting them to sell off what they owned and embark with their families on a daunting journey into the unknown, beginning with an arduous crossing of the Atlantic.

Researchers estimate that nearly 130,000 individuals from the ethnically Polish lands arrived in Brazil between 1820 and 1955. Upon arrival, these immigrants faced a completely unfamiliar and indeed perilous

world: a sweltering climate, wild uninhabited lands, primeval rainforests, epidemics, harsh living conditions, insects, venomous snakes, and wild animals, all compounded by a language barrier, the absence of any planned settlement strategy, and a general lack of assistance. These challenging conditions led the survivors to form ethnic enclaves within Brazilian society. Today, the descendants of these hardy emigrants continue to live in the same areas as their ancestors, spread across the Brazilian interior. The Polish-Brazilian community, as they identify themselves, has unique characteristics that set them apart from Brazilians and other Polish diaspora groups worldwide. They are known for their strong attachment to the land, close family and community bonds, adherence to their ancestral faith, a high degree of endogamy (in-group marriage), a persistent sense of their distinct ethnic identity, nostalgia for their ancestral homeland, preserved knowledge of the Polish language as learned from their great-grandparents and grandparents (even in the fifth generation!), a desire to belong to ethnic Polish organizations, and upkeeping certain Polish customs and traditions.

Museums – cultural custodians

The Polish diaspora in Brazil has a rich history and an important cultural legacy, in terms of both significance and scope. Starting back in 1890, immigrants began founding various Polish associations and unions, setting up newspapers and schools (by 1937, there were 349 Polish schools in Brazil), organizing libraries, theater troupes, choirs, song and dance



Mikołaj Radomski, MA

is an ethnographer and ethnologist, curator at the Museum of Pomeranian Folk Culture in Swołowo. His current research interests focus on the history of Polish diaspora museology, the cultural heritage and contemporary perception of the Brazilian Polish community. He has carried out field research and a project to inventory Polish museum items in Brazil in 2002–2003, 2022, and 2023.

polonica.brasil@gmail.com



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Part the ethnographic exhibitions on display at Museu Tingüi-Cuera in Araucária



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Eulalia Dziejczak – a retired teacher and founder of the Museu Sto Lat in the town of Bateias de Baixo in the state of Santa Catarina. The photograph on the wall is of her grandmother (Julia Mikuś, née Pazda, 1860–1958), who came to Brazil from Poland in 1874 as a fourteen-year-old girl

ensembles, sports clubs, and churches. Against the backdrop of all these varied efforts to maintain a sense of ethnic identity – motivated by both socio-patriotic and educational motives – museums are a relatively recent phenomenon.

The first museum-type institutions started appearing within the Polish diaspora in the 1980s, over a century after the first pioneers started arriving from Poland. The concept of establishing museums originated from members of the Polish émigré intelligentsia, including public activists and clergy members. Often, such initiatives got their start as a temporary exhibition organized to commemorate anniversaries (typically centenaries) of particular immigrants' arrival or the founding of particular settlements. People participate in such museum initiatives primarily out of a desire to preserve traces of their Polish heritage for future generations and to ensure the group's future. Today, 25 Polish-diaspora institutions in Brazil engage in museum-type activities, including collecting, preserving, presenting, and sometimes conserving memorabilia. Most of these are grassroots institutions, emerging as specific societal initiatives without the official support of the Brazilian state, relying on the generosity of Polish-Brazilian community members. It is notable that no other ethnic immigrant group within Brazilian society has established such a comprehensive network of museums dedicated to preserving the memory of their ancestral homeland.

In a research project carried out in 2022–2023, I took stock of these Polish museum institutions operating in Brazil. One output of this study is a map of these facilities, located across three southern states: Paraná – 15 institutions, Rio Grande do Sul – 6, and Santa Catarina – 3. One further museum is situated in the state of Espírito Santo in southeastern Brazil. These Polish museums differ in legal form, structure, scope of impact, and the nature of their activities.

They encompass a variety of museum types: open-air, historical-ethnographic, regional, memorial rooms, and private collections. Some are managed by individuals or family groups (e.g. Mieczysław Waszczuk's collection in Áurea colony or the Museu da Colonização Polonesa in Baixa Grande), village communities (e.g. Museu Polonês in Bromado), Roman Catholic parishes (e.g. Centro Histórico e Cultural Polska in Dom Pedro II colony), Polish associations (e.g. Museu Sto Lat in Bateias de Baixo), and municipalities (e.g. Casa da Memória in Virmond).

Some are deep in the interior and therefore challenging to reach, maintained by volunteers and only open by appointment. Others are situated in larger towns, are funded by municipalities, employ professional staff and also engage in educational, research, and publishing activities (e.g., Museu Tingüi-Cuera in Araucaria). Regardless of their size, all these institutions serve as local custodians of local memory, attracting history buffs and Polish culture aficionados from successive generations born on Brazilian soil. The Memorial da Imigração Polonesa in Curitiba – the beating heart of Polish life in Brazil and a hub of Polish museum activity – is the only national-scale institution. Situated in the picturesque Pope John Paul II Park within a segment of the Atlantic forest Mata Atlântica, it hosts the most significant events for the Polish community.

Ethnographic collections

All told, the museum collections housed within Polish diaspora institutions in Brazil comprise over 6,000 objects. Given that the immigrants primarily came from peasant backgrounds, the collections are largely ethnographic in nature. They represent the material heritage of the Polish-Brazilian community and illustrate the rustic culture of the Polish diaspora. These museums are often community-led, with their collection efforts relying heavily on donors. Alongside the initiators who collected exhibits through fieldwork, colony residents have also contributed to the museum collections. They gathered all kinds of items associated with the immigrants and their descendants, which were deemed valuable. A notable feature of these collections is their local origin and personal touch, instilling a sense of intimacy and homeliness. In some cases, the bulk of the exhibits were donated by a handful of families who had amassed memorabilia from their own forebears over the years. The oldest items in these collections date back to the latter half of the nineteenth century, including items that the immigrants brought with them from Poland, such as travel luggage (chests, trunks, suitcases), family keepsakes, religious images, prayer books, crucifixes, small tools, and everyday items. Items originating back in Poland are especially treasured among the

museum displays and generally regarded as the most highly prized.

Among the most interesting artifacts are original log houses (*casas de troncos*) that have been relocated to the open-air museum in Curitiba, the Solidarity Park in Araucaria, and the museum in the Dom Pedro II colony. The oldest of these date from the 1870s. Objects from the “pioneer period,” evidencing the migrants’ adaptations to their new living conditions, are slightly less old. Among these are armadillo traps, simple farming tools adapted for cultivating the Brazilian soil, *fakony* (long knives used for clearing the forest), *erva-mate* threshing tools, tools for cultivating *feijão* black beans, coffee bean roasters, and hand-operated orange presses known as *laranży*.

This category of exhibits – including items vital for survival during the early years in Brazil – also encompasses a variety of other agricultural tools (made entirely from wood or a combination of wood and stone), rudimentary furniture, clay vessels acquired from Indigenous peoples, hand-carved cedar troughs known as *gamele* (variously used for mixing bread dough, salting meat, washing dishes, and bathing infants), and wooden wagons covered with canvas, known as *karosy*, which Polish immigrants popularized in southern Brazil. These artifacts are often handcrafted by the immigrants themselves. Unless kept in glass cases, the museum items are often accessible, hands-on displays: visitors can touch, hold, and examine them up close. The museum collections are viewed as functional objects – the point of their collection is to serve educational purposes, to benefit both individuals and the broader local community.

In my project, I created detailed inventories of each of these Polish diaspora institutions and created digital records of every object. To visually document the exhibits, I set up a photography studio on location, utilizing 2D photography techniques to capture each item meticulously. To better structure the inventory, I categorized the collections into several types of artifacts: architectural landmarks, agricultural tools and machinery, tools used in rural crafts, vehicles from village life, weapons, furniture, personal memorabilia, documents, religious artifacts, clothing, musical instruments, works of art, educational supplies, medical items, as well as artifacts originating from Indigenous cultures.

Collective memory

There has been, we can say, a significant upsurge in Polish diaspora museology in Brazil in recent years. Such diaspora museums are guardians of the memory of the difficult trials and tribulations faced by the early Polish pioneers who came to these distant lands to



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escape famine. These institutions play a critical role in ensuring that the enormous efforts required to survive in such a daunting environment will never be forgotten. The cherished and sometimes idealized homeland of the immigrants’ ancestral homeland stands as a potent symbol that binds together the successive generations of Polish settlers scattered across Brazil. The way monuments, keepsakes, and items connected to Poland are regarded by members of the Polish community in Brazil reflects their attitude toward their identity, origins, and a deep-seated pride in their heritage. These exhibits – objects that were once used in everyday life but have now become vessels of meaning within the Polish community – evoke people and events from a shared history that hold significance for the entire community. These collected pieces forge a connection between present times and the past they embody, offering insights and fostering a collective memory. They strive to breathe new life into the Polish cultural heritage, to transfer the Polish legacy to successive generations and kindle a sense of historical continuity among the Polish diaspora in Brazilian society.

Advancing the study of the Polish diaspora’s museum movement and identifying the tangible cultural heritage of the Brazilian Polish community is the aim of a research grant executed from 2022 to 2024 under the auspices of the National Institute of Polish Cultural Heritage Abroad “Polonika” (project title: “Polish cultural heritage in Polish diaspora museum collections in Brazil”). Participating in this project are historian Rev. Zdzisław Malczewski S.Chr, PhD, rector of the Polish Catholic Mission in Brazil, and the ethnologist and museum curator Mikołaj Radomski.

Photo 1
The Memorial to Polish Immigration in Pope John Paul II Park in Curitiba

Photo 2
A trough, known as a gamele, from the collection of the Museu da Colonização Polonesa in the Baixa Grande colony

Photo 3
A manually-operated orange squeezer from the collection of the Centro Histórico e Cultural Polska in the Dom Pedro II colony

Further reading:

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