



Despite the hour and the below-freezing temperatures, patrons of St. Florian Roman Catholic Church in Hamtramck gather around a symbolic bonfire on the steps of their church on Easter Morning.

Photo by Ben Logan

## Polish Spirit

### New film traces ethnicity's journey into metro Detroit

By ELIZABETH H. VOSS  
Special to The Oakland Press

**P**olish immigrants helped build Detroit and their stories deserve to be told, according to Keith Famie.

"What was it like to come to Detroit without any money or family? How did they survive? It's about fortitude and it's about heroics," says the local chef turned filmmaker.

For his "Our Polish Story" documentary airing 7 p.m. Saturday on WXYZ-Channel 7, the Novi resident interviewed dozens of Poles in metro Detroit and traveled to Poland and another lesser known Nazi concentration camp called Majdanek. He worked over eight months with production teams from his Wixom-based Visionalist Entertainment Productions and Kinetic Post in Southfield.

"The story is about respect and admiration for elders because they are the pioneers," Famie, 47, says.

"When they're gone, their stories are gone. We're celebrating their lives in this documentary."

After Germans, Poles make up the second largest ethnic group in metro Detroit, says historian

#### About the show

"Our Polish Story," an hour-long documentary about the Polish community in metro Detroit, will air 7 p.m. Saturday on WXYZ-Channel 7. Learn more about the making of "Our Polish Story" and "The Story of" series at [www.ourstoryof.com](http://www.ourstoryof.com). Find more about the Piast Institute at [www.piastinstitute.org](http://www.piastinstitute.org). For information about Detroit history books and genealogy workshops and seminars by Ceil Wendt Jensen, go to [www.mipolonia.net](http://www.mipolonia.net).

affairs in Hamtramck. "There are half a million Poles in metro Detroit," says the 69-year-old historian who has taught at Heidelberg College in Ohio, Southwest Minnesota State University and Madonna University in Livonia.

"They literally created neighborhood after neighborhood from farmland."

Polish immigrants came in three major waves — between the Civil War and 1900, from the turn of the century to 1914, and after World War II, Radzilowski says.



Photo by JOE VAUGHN

At Auschwitz concentration camp, film crew members Kevin Hewitt (foreground, from left to right), Ben Logan and Keith Famie interview an Auschwitz survivor (background from left to right), Zofia Szostak of Huron Township and Zofia Abramczuk, a Polish childhood friend whom Szostak hadn't seen in 60 years when the two were separated.

"In some auto factories, they were the majority," he says. "Polish was the language of the assembly line. When the (United Auto Workers union) was organizing in the 1930s, they went on Polish radio."

Some resented the immigrants. According to a survey done in the early 1960s, discrimination against Poles was second only to prejudice against African-Americans, Radzilowski says. Born and raised in Hamtramck, he remembers being stopped by police when he drove through Grosse Pointe, which had a Realtor point system to keep out Poles, Italians, blacks, Jews and Asians until the discriminatory

practice was struck down by the Michigan Supreme Court in 1963.

As a new generation of Polish people went to college and rose in socioeconomic status, prejudice against the ethnic group faded in the 1950s and almost disappeared by the 1970s and '80s, explains the historian.

Poles should learn more about their own family histories, says Ceil Wendt Jensen, who also appears in the film. After retiring from a 30-year career as a high school teacher, the 57-year-old Rochester Hills resident became a certified genealogist. She has traced

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