

Speech at  
Cornerstone Laying in the Polish Room  
Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh University  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
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#### CHALLENGE IN THE USE OF THE POLISH ROOM

The Polish Room here in the Cathedral of Learning of the University of Pittsburgh stands for the achievement of a people whose history is most colorful. It betokens accomplishments and a culture of which we are inheritors. We are proud of those accomplishments and of that culture. The same blood is in our veins as in the veins of those who in the past dreamed and worked generation after generation for the establishment and advancement of the Polish nation.

The room must be more than an empty symbol, however, if it has any vital significance. It is not a mere museum in which one satisfies his curiosity as to conditions and achievements remote from us in time and space. It is a symbol instead of something that is alive and full of energy. Its situation here in America is like our own. We who are of Polish extraction carry with us consciously or unconsciously the heritage of an old world tradition of unusual interest and importance but we are living in a new world in which our tradition is only one among many. Manifestly in such a situation we do not desire that our own traditions as individuals of Polish extraction should be surrendered for the traditions of another culture. Neither do we expect that our own traditions will predominate and supplant all others. What we reasonably expect is that in a new world made up of many elements transplanted like our own from a different soil, our tradition should contribute in a substantial way to the evolution of a new and American tradition.

When I speak of ourselves as being one group among many transplanted from an alien soil I have in mind, of course, the significant fact that this country as a whole represents a fusion of transplanted peoples and transplanted cultures. The first European settlements in this country were made a little more than 300 years ago. The culture that those settlers found on this continent has almost wholly disappeared. Our civilization as it is, is almost entirely a product of a European background. For 300 years these various peoples streamed from overseas into this vast new continent. They found it practically empty and waiting for their reception. With the exception of a sparse population of American Indians no one was displaced or crowded by their arrival. They moved, practically speaking, into new and unused quarters. They sought new opportunities, greater freedom, increased well being. No one of them thought for a moment, however, of abandoning entirely the culture in which he had been reared. That culture clung to him. In some cases circumstances were such that the culture was readily maintained in an intact and nearly pure form, little touched or modified by the other transplanted cultures which were its neighbors. Here and there all over the country you could find units that were predominantly Polish or English or Scotch or German or Italian or Scandinavian, etc. In all these communities there was the necessity of a certain amount of effort to hold on to the traditions which had been brought from the old world and a certain amount of effort to make adaptations to the other

cultures that had been transplanted here. The result of this effort was an increasingly rich mixture of traditions and cultures which in the end became and are American; giving rise to a wholesome culture--wholesome because it is free and unlimited like the air we breathe--making this our nation strong--strong physically, mentally and morally.

There is a distinction here that I want to make very carefully and to emphasize properly. I am speaking of a culture which must be a product of all these factors. I am not thinking of American culture as something alien to Polish traditions nor hostile to any other national tradition and therefore bound to supplant it. I am instead thinking of an American tradition that is still in process of evolution, that has by no means been as yet completely formed. It is something to which we are contributing. We are not abandoning one and accepting another tradition nor are we forcing a tradition upon others.

In taking this point of view we look definitely toward the future rather than toward the past. We even look toward the future rather than at the present. We are thinking of a culture wholly new in the world, unexampled and American.

The process of fusing these cultures is not one that can be deliberately directed and controlled. It is one that grows naturally. In the process of its growth the individual who is of Polish extraction will not be thinking in terms of all of these other cultures which he is expected to learn something about. He will be thinking merely in general terms of adapting himself to the environment in which he lives. That environment is made up of numerous and potent influences. The first of these is the home and the family. Within the home and the family each individual assimilates the basic conditions of his environment. The process of assimilation is a natural and beneficent one. It goes on in the familiar and affectionate relationships between parents and children, brothers and sisters, relatives, friends, and acquaintances.

Within this sphere of environmental influences one who is of Polish extraction becomes naturally grounded in the traditions and cultures of which he is the heir by blood.

Next beyond the home and the family, the church and the school have their place as nurseries of the culture which the individual imbibes. Within them and from them he develops contacts with a larger and more varied world than that which he knew within the family and the home. He finds in them more contacts with other cultures. This University and this Cathedral of Learning are a typical example. The ring of experience widens. Beyond the church and the school come those miscellaneous multiplied influences which carry the individual farther and farther into the vast and complex world where influences of every sort begin to exert their pressure upon him. There are newspapers, the movies, the theatre, sports, the activities of social groups, and prominent and particularly influential among them is the profession, trade, business or particular work that the individual finally becomes tied to. In it it is necessary for him to sharpen and concentrate all his powers. To the serious aims of his occupation he brings not only his natural powers but the discipline to which he has been subject in

the successively widening circles of his experience as a growing youth.

But the work and the livelihood, of course, are not everything. Making a living is not an end in itself. It is intended to serve less material purposes and it is in the art of living itself that the successive influences of the home, the family, the church, the school and the secular interests of an ever widening world bear their fruit. The individual is the product of all these influences plus his innate capacities. His life will reflect the cultural influences to which he has been subjected and to the extent that he has a sensitive and forceful personality he is not merely a participant in life but a contributor to it. By his own life he will enrich life in general. He will thus guide and direct the lives of others.

Finally, the individual completes the course which I have described, by marriage and the establishment of his own home.

Having passed through the various stages of cultural experience which I have described, the family, the home, the church, the school, the work and the multifarious influences of the world at large, he creates now for a new generation such a home and family as that in which he himself began.

It is by this natural process of family life, religious life, educational life and economic life that the New American culture of which I am speaking is developed. While the process in its general outlines is simple and I think relatively fixed, in its details it varies enormously according to the powers and interests of the individual and the particular circle of influences in which life and experience happen to place him. By this I mean the apparent breaks in his life--or the unforeseen and unexpected abnormal happenings that tend to make or break his mind, heart and body--remoulding him as it were by the process of inward changes which sooner or later are linked together as one continuous whole of the individual as a member of society, for tears as well as smiles are among the attributes of the individual. Washington Irving wrote: "There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love." In this connection we can recall the words of Alcott: "Our bravest and best lessons are not learned through success, but through misadventure."

I do not think that particular subjects or matters of information are of essential importance. One cannot learn everything, nor can one become perfect. It was written that "a wise man acknowledges his ignorance--only a fool presumes to know everything." One learns what the environment and experience bring to him. He exercises a certain amount of selection and judgment as to what he shall give his attention to--but much can and does happen to affect his attention. In this process as I have described it, he comes in contact with influences derived originally from many different sources. He absorbs something from all that he touches and in the end he represents that new man and ultimately that new American culture to which I feel we are all contributing--proudly and gladly.

I am happy to say that physical education as fostered by the

Falcons is one of the most wholesome and important elements in this new culture. Our aim is to have well rounded and well developed individuals-- sound minds and sound bodies. It is difficult to have a civilization marked by strength and virility of mind only. If a civilization is to have strength and virility there must be physical health and well being as well as keen minds.

My line of thought apparently has carried me far away from this Polish Room, but I hope it is obvious that I have sought to do no more than give a vital and constructive significance to this room and its use. As I said in the first place, it is not a museum commemorating something that is dead. It is a symbol of something that has lived and that under new and changed conditions will continue to live, an essential and irreplaceable element in our culture and in the culture of our future generations.

So, to conclude,

"Let us all be up and doing with a mind for any fate -  
Still achieving, still pursuing, learn to labor and to  
wait."