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# POLISH AS HERITAGE LANGUAGE

Polish is spoken today in numerous countries around the world, a reflection of the vast Polish diaspora's efforts to preserve their linguistic heritage and cultural identity across borders and generations.

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Poland has always been one of the largest migrant-sending countries in Central and Eastern Europe. For more than a century it was a vast reservoir of migrant labor for many migrant-receiving states. In our increasingly globalized world, the story of migration is not just about the movement of people but also about the languages they carry with them. Statistics indicate that there are now at least 15 million people with Polish roots living outside of Poland, many of whom still use the Polish language in their day-to-day lives.

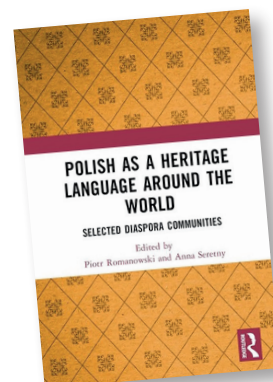
Nevertheless, it is important to note that Polish is spoken outside of Poland not just as a consequence of labor migration over the decades and centuries. Communities of ethnic Poles, and of Polish speakers, are of differing provenance and have been shaped by different historical circumstances. For instance, in nearby parts of some of the surrounding countries, Polish spoken by groups of speakers that have long been *in situ*: including northern Czechia and Slovakia, western parts of Belarus and Ukraine, southeast Lithuania, and Latvia (many of these locations were at some time in the past part of Poland's territory). There has also long been a sizeable Polish migrant community in nearby Germany (stretching back to Prussian times).

But Polish-speaking communities also exist in countries farther afield, not bordering on Poland.

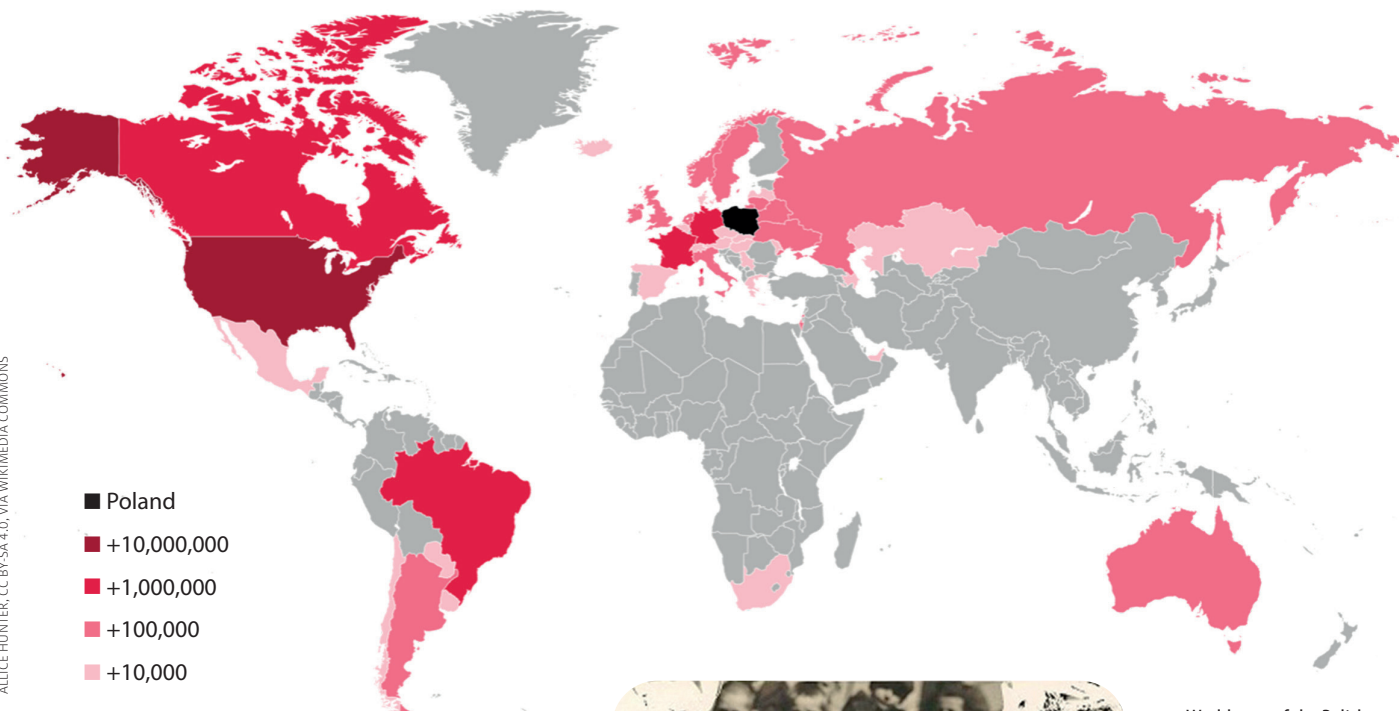
Groups of Polish speakers exist in some post-Soviet states, predominantly Russia and Kazakhstan, largely as an aftermath of deportations during World War II. Because of the long tradition of extensive emigration from Poland during different time periods, most notably after WWII, millions of Polish speakers can also be found in countries as far-flung as Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Israel, Australia, and the United States. Nowadays, quite a few Polish speakers also reside in other EU member states, such as Ireland, as a consequence of the freedom of movement that EU membership has provided for two decades now.

At present, particularly large Polish-speaking communities outside of Poland itself can be found in the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In the latter, among some 10 million people identifying as being of Polish origin, about 600,000 people are estimated to use Polish in their day-to-day lives.

Each of these communities has its own story, and the sociolinguistic situation of the Polish language in each of them is different. The diverse Polish diaspora's efforts to maintain their language across continents is the subject of a collective volume we have edited, *Polish as a Heritage Language Around the World: Selected Diaspora Communities*, published by Routledge in 2024. The individual contributions explore the multifaceted dimensions of Polish as a heritage



Piotr Romanowski,  
Anna Seretny (eds.),  
*Polish as a Heritage Language Around the World: Selected Diaspora Communities*  
Routledge 2024



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language, its transmission, challenges, and the distinctive position it occupies in global sociolinguistics.

The book paints a broad picture of Polish migration, driven by a combination of political, economic, educational, and professional motives, including nineteenth-century uprisings and the World Wars and Iron Curtain of the twentieth century. It highlights the challenges faced by Polish diaspora communities in maintaining their heritage language, especially in environments where Polish does not enjoy a high status or visibility. Each chapter of this volume includes a brief account of the Polish diaspora in a specific area – including the United Kingdom, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Ukraine, the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, North Africa, South Africa, and Australia. Certain themes critical to heritage language studies resonate across all chapters, specifically, the maintenance, transmission, and evolution of heritage languages, alongside language education and bilingualism in both children and adults.

The volume is the first of its type, sketching out the presence of the Polish language in many very different places and providing a broad outline of the issues faced by each diaspora community. A significant portion is dedicated to exploring the underprivileged status of Polish as a heritage language. Unlike widely taught languages such as German or French, Polish faces unique challenges in heritage language education due to societal attitudes and the scarcity of resources. Despite these hurdles, immigrant families cultivate positive attitudes toward Polish, fostering a sense of hybrid linguistic and cultural identity among their children. By presenting a detailed outline of Polish language presence in diverse global locations, the book highlights the need for more inclusive and comprehensive studies in the field of heritage languages.



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World map of the Polish diaspora (showing individuals with Polish heritage, not necessarily Polish speakers)

Polish refugees arriving at Wellington and at the Polish Children's Camp at Pahiatua, 1944, taken from New Zealand Prime Minister Walter Nash's collection

Our conclusion to the volume reiterates the significance of emigration in shaping the linguistic, historical, and sociopolitical contours of Polish diaspora communities. We underscore the importance of language in maintaining cultural and identity ties with the homeland, despite geographical distances and changing global dynamics. The selection of communities featured in the book reflects a deliberate effort to showcase the vast dispersion of Polish speakers worldwide, from Europe to the Americas and remote diasporas in Africa and Australia.

We intend for *Polish as a Heritage Language Around the World* to stand not only as a body of scholarly work but also as a tribute to the resilience and adaptability of Polish diaspora communities. It highlights the critical role of heritage language maintenance in preserving cultural identity and fostering connections across generations. We hope that the book will be an invaluable resource for linguists, educators, and anyone interested in the dynamics of language preservation within diaspora communities. ■

Further reading:

Romanowski, P. & Seretny A. (eds.) (2024). *Polish as a Heritage Language: Selected Diaspora Communities*. Routledge.