

# History of the Polish Club of San Francisco

## *Brief History of Polish Club Location — Mission District*

The Polish Club of San Francisco is located in a district rich with a diverse cultural history and significant historical events. Located in a region now known and referred to as the "Mission District" the area was originally the home of the [Ohlone](#) Indians who inhabited this region for over 2,000 years. When the first Spanish missionaries arrived here, during the late [18th century](#), they found the Ohlone Indians living peacefully in a village at the edge of a lagoon, hunting and gathering. In this location, in the year [1776](#), not very far from the present day Polish Club (22nd Street & Shotwell), the Spanish founded [Mission San Francisco de Asis](#) (16th Street & Dolores) otherwise known by San Franciscans and tourists alike as *Mission Dolores*. This Mission building has the distinction of being one of the oldest buildings in San Francisco. It was the sixth [California mission](#) founded by Lt. José Joaquín Moraga and Father Francisco Palou (both members of the [de Anza Expedition](#)). It received the nickname of "Mission Dolores" from the nearby *Lago de los Dolores* ("Lake of the Sorrows"), which has since vanished. The Mission itself was named for [St. Francis of Assisi](#), founder of the [Franciscan Order](#). Unfortunately, the arrival of the Spaniards to this part of Northern California marked the beginning of the end of the Ohlone Indian culture.

Next, during the mid-19th Century, came the great European and Asian immigrations. The mid-19th Century was marred by political turmoil in many parts of the world as well as great famines. Poland was one such country that was in the throws of political upheaval. The ancient state of Poland had been conquered and divided up by three imperial powers—the Russian, Prussian, and Austro-Hungarian empires. Although the national identity of the Poles came under harsh attack by these hostile imperial regimes, Poles were always unified by a belief in their right to their own independence, in their right to freedom of worship as Roman Catholics, and in their distinct identity as a people. However, the difficulty of maintaining this identity under hostile imperial regimes led many Poles to seek freedom overseas. This led large migrations of Poles to seek refuge outside their homeland. Many traveled to and settled in the United States. At the turn of the 20th Century, Polish immigration exploded. With imperial repression, land shortages, religious repression and chronic unemployment making life more and more unbearable for the Poles of Europe, and as the 19th century waned, they left for America by the thousands and then by the hundreds of thousands. By the mid to late 19th Century and beginning of the 20th Century, the majority of these immigrants settled in the eastern and mid-western states of the U.S. but many also ventured further west to search out new opportunities.

Initially, not all immigrants intended to make this foreign land their new home. Many of the earlier Poles, known as "*za chlebem*" meaning "for-bread" immigrants, planned on a temporary stay, to earn a nest egg and then to finally return to their homeland. But whatever their intentions, the majority of Polish immigrants ended up remaining in the United States. Nevertheless, they still felt the heart beat of their homeland and passionately guarded their language, faith, and sense of themselves as Poles. As Poles poured into the country, they came together in communities that

preserved many aspects of the Polish way of life. They began building churches and schools, and establishing social, cultural and benevolent organizations.

“All immigrant groups developed mutual aid associations of one kind or another. The names of these organizations differed from nationality to nationality and the form and nature of organizational life differed as well, but whether they were called mutual aid, self-help, benevolent, fraternal, or sick benefit societies, the descriptive titles of the early ethno-cultural associations reflected the purpose of banding together.

They were the acknowledgement of mutual dependence among immigrants in the face of shared peril. Although the creation of these societies almost always answered socio-economic and ritual problems first, they also spoke to the dignity and morale of both the individual immigrant and the ethnic group in North America.”

(Edited excerpt from the Introduction in *Polyphony (Mutual Aid)*. Written by Robert F. Harney.)

Development and settlement of the various ethnic groups further intensified after the great [1906 Earthquake](#) and fire. The [earthquake](#) struck [San Francisco](#) and the coast of northern [California](#) at 5:12 am on Wednesday, [April 18, 1906](#). The most widely accepted magnitude for the earthquake is a [moment magnitude](#) (Mw) 7.8; however, other values have been proposed from 7.7 to as high as 8.3 [\[1\]](#). The main shock [epicenter](#) occurred offshore about 2 miles from the City. It ruptured along the [San Andreas Fault](#) both northward and southward for a total length of 296 miles (477 km)[\[2\]](#). Shaking was felt from [Oregon](#) to [Los Angeles](#), and inland as far as central [Nevada](#). The earthquake and resulting fire would be remembered as one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the [United States](#), comparable in devastation to the [Galveston Hurricane of 1900](#) and [Hurricane Katrina](#) in 2005.

Many of the City's displaced businesses and residents moved into the Mission district, making Mission Street a major ethnic commercial thoroughfare — a characteristic it still retains. This was mainly due to the fact that on April 19th, 1906, a fire hydrant, now known as “THE LITTLE GIANT,” was found to have water. Fire hoses were joined together and the water supply from “THE LITTLE GIANT” hydrant has been credited with stopping the conflagration from advancing any further into the Mission district. The fire that was sweeping the City was moving into the Mission District but was stopped at 20th and Dolores Streets by 3000 volunteers and a few firemen who fought the blaze with knapsacks, brooms and a little water from the operating hydrant at 20th and Church Streets. In memory of this significant event, which preserved many historic architectural buildings in the area, the hydrant is ceremoniously painted gold on an annual basis.



Above: The Polish Club as it looked when purchased in 1926

One such building saved from the conflagration was a local Baptist church located at 22nd and Shotwell Streets. This building has great significance for Polish immigrants to this day. Since the original Polish settlements in Northern California did not have a place to meet, they usually held their meetings in private homes or in spaces rented from other organizations. For example, the oldest San Francisco Polish society, founded in 1863 by Rudolf Korwin Piotrowski and Kazimierz Bielawski, known as the Polish Society of California, rented their offices at 273 Golden Gate Avenue, in a building that now no longer exists. The Polish organization known as St. Stanislaus Benevolent Society, also originating in San Francisco and founded in 1889, held its meetings at St. Boniface Catholic Church, a church established by the local German community. The Polish Community in San Francisco, seeing the great necessity to establish a meeting place of their own for social events and for the preservation of their culture and language, began to address this significant problem. Three of the most prominent Polish organizations of the day: (1) the Polish Society of California, (2) the St. Stanislaus Benevolent Society (Sw. Stanislaw Biskupa Polski), and (3) the Polish Literary and Dramatic Circle, came together at a formal meeting and decided to join forces to establish a Polish Club. A great fundraising drive began by these three Polish organizations and, in 1926, enough funds were collected to buy the church building (see above) officially establishing the first and only [Polish Club of San Francisco](#). Today, it is commonly referred to by the Polish community as "Dom Polski" or "Polish House," is known to Poles throughout the world and continues to fulfill the functions for which it was purchased.

During the 1940s to 1960s, another large wave of immigrants and refugees from Central and South America, fleeing civil war, began to move into the area, giving back to the Mission district the characteristic Latin flavor it is known for today and began with in its early history. The Polish Club of San Francisco respects the Latin community and opens its doors to it for their personal events. However, the Club's main purpose was, and is, to serve as a center for the propagation of Polish

culture, art, language and community and is representative of the unity of all Polish organizations not only in Northern California but the world at large.



Above: The Founding Fathers and Mothers of the Polish Club - September 12, 1926: Stanislaw A. Bloński, Pawel Brzoza, Dyczynski, Feliz Gottlicher, Jan Klich, Teofil Kot, Leon Kowalkowski, Otto G. Kuklinski, Jan Kuczynski, Felix Majeranowski, Josefa Niklasiewicz, Katarzyna Pich, Franciszek Potash, Adolf Strzelecki

### *Laying the Foundations for a Polish Club*

The first written documents addressing the need to establish a Polish Club can be found in the Board Minutes of meetings of the Polish Society of California. They are written in Polish and are part of the archival records of the Polish Society of California. On August 2, 1925, during one such Board Meeting, the Polish Society of California invited Miss Wyzozynska, a representative of the Polish Literary and Dramatic Circle, to attend. She proposed that the Society create a Committee for the purpose of raising funds for a Polish Club. The Committee would be called the *Polish Home Building Committee*. Subsequently, Mr. Tomaszewski, also of the Polish Society of California, proposed rules for the establishment of support committees. Both organizations would initiate *Polish Home Building Committees* within their own organizational structures for the purpose of raising funds *independently* but towards the mutual goal of establishing a Polish Club. After this initial meeting, the committees of both organizations worked full speed at fundraising. Soon afterward, the St. Stanislaus Benevolent Society joined in this endeavor and initiated a third *Polish Home Building Committee* within its organization.

The first *joint* meeting of all three *Polish Home Building Committees* from all three organizations was held at the end of October 1925. During this meeting it was decided that each Society should

elect five members to the *Joint Committee*. In addition, participants formulated the initial guidelines, which declared that the *Joint Committee* would elect its own Board and have its own bank account. In the meantime, a fundraising campaign for the Club was in full swing. It was run simultaneously, but independently, by all three Committees. The most important element of this campaign included participating in the 1925 Diamond Jubilee Parade, a celebration to mark the 75th anniversary of California's admission to the union, an event attended by numerous Polish-Americans from all over the State of California.

During this fundraising campaign a very interesting division of responsibilities emerged among the three Committees. The Polish Society of California, a fraternal benefit society, and the St. Stanislaus Benevolent Society, a sick benefit society, became financial pillars of the Polish Club due to their business skills. While the relatively new non-profit Polish Literary and Dramatic Circle, an organization promoting Polish culture and arts, became the spiritual engine and soul of the whole campaign.

Fundraising efforts were run harmoniously and at the end of winter on March 29, 1926, funds were sufficient to purchase a building. The Committees found the church building located at 3040 - 22nd Street in the then elegant Mission District of San Francisco and authorized its purchase. Formal purchase of the building was completed on April 19, 1926 for the sum of \$5,000. Upon purchase of the building the Polish Club's governing rules were established as follows: it was decided that the three San Francisco Societies which participated in the fundraising would elect from their membership directors that would be seated as Board Members of the Polish Club. The Polish Society of California and the St. Stanislaus Benevolent Society would seat six directors each since they both contributed \$3,000 to the purchase of the building; and the Polish Literary and Dramatic Circle would seat three directors each, since it represents a very large number of Poles and contributed to the fundraising effort but was unable to support the Club financially. Following such guidelines the first Board of Directors of the Polish Club was formed.

Soon after the purchase, the building was insured and remodeling and adaptation work was begun to convert the structure from a church into a social hall. First, the library of the Polish Society of California was moved to the new location on the first floor. It was also decided that all three Societies would pay \$5.00 for the daily use of the Club for their meetings. The first recorded meeting was held there on October 1, 1926. This was a meeting of the Polish Society of California. Among other declarations it was decided that the library would be accessible to and open to each member of the three Societies of the Polish Club. This decision was one of the first declarations of the Polish Club and closes one of the most interesting and significant events of Polish history in California.

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