

# Immigration, Industry and the Environment in Oshawa

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At one time Oshawa, Ontario was known as the Manchester of Canada, in reference to the great industrial city in England. Oshawa's employment sector has historically been manufacturing based and was led by the automotive giant General Motors and several other heavy industrial employers. Two of these manufacturers, Fittings Limited and Ontario Malleable Iron Works, hired from a large pool of Polish and Ukrainian immigrants, particularly in the post-WWII boom. Both factories started operation during the depression years of the early 1870's, and managed to stay in business for more than 100 years before economic considerations caused their demise.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is a consideration of two distinct ethnic communities that share parallel old country histories and that shaped new world communities. It will also examine some of the environmental, social and economic considerations facing the City of Oshawa for future redevelopment of the former factory sites.

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As Canada shifted from agricultural production to industrial development in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the local blacksmith was replaced by the foundryman.

Industrial development in Oshawa began long before General Motors set up shop. While there were a number of small-scale operations that manufactured steel and other metal goods, two foundries played a significant role in the economic and community development of Oshawa: Ontario Malleable Iron Company and Fittings Limited.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur J. Barnwell, Arthur J. and David Branch. *Molten Metal – Shaping Ontario*. (Canada: The Ontario Chapter of the American Foundrymen's Society, Post-1995) 22-23; Karen Smith. "Ontario Malleable Iron Co., Ltd., Historical Information Sheet." Archives, Oshawa Historical Society, 1998.

The Ontario Malleable Iron Works opened in 1872-1873 and by 1928 employed 500 workers manufacturing malleable and cast iron products including pipe fittings, automotive castings and agricultural implements. The factory closed its doors permanently in March 1977 after a lockout which began in January 1976.

Fittings Limited started in 1873 as the Oshawa Stove Company and by the height of its prosperity in the 1970's grew to incorporate 22 acres and employ more than 800 workers. Fittings Limited was soon one of the largest manufacturers of its kind in Canada producing waterworks fittings and plumbing brass goods. By the 1980's the company was plagued with financial problems which resulted in closure in 1987, though a few employees lingered until 1989 when the last of the 55 employees were laid off. At the time they were earning \$11.00 to \$12.00 per hour.<sup>2</sup>

Both companies, Fittings in particular, were noted for employee health and safety issues and environmental concerns relating to reports of toxic materials. Employees of Fittings reported to the media that toxic materials such as PCBs were burned and buried on the foundry site. Many compared the Fittings site with Love Canal.

### Ontario Malleable Iron Works

Joseph Hall established an iron works to produce malleable iron finger bars for the cutting apparatus of reapers and mowers for the Massey-Harris companies. The iron works has been described as a daughter plant of a Rochester firm than its branch plant, because it was managed by Hall's son-in-law, and combined Montreal, New York and local capital.<sup>3</sup> The company held a patent for a model of an adjustable wrench in 1882.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Oshawa Times*, May 1, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon M. Winder, "Technology Transfer in the Ontario Harvester Industry 1830-1900", *Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine*, vol. 18, n° 1, (46) 1994, 73-74, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Appendix: INVENTORY OF MAJOR CANADIAN TOOL AND DIE MANUFACTURERS FROM 1820 TO 1914 – [http://www.thetoolgroupofcanada.com/images/Canadian\\_Tool\\_Manufacturers\\_1820-1914.pdf](http://www.thetoolgroupofcanada.com/images/Canadian_Tool_Manufacturers_1820-1914.pdf)

In 1862, William F. Cowan (an Irish immigrant) established a general store, and eventually convinced his brother John to give up his business in Toronto in 1866. Eventually, they would come to establish the Ontario Malleable Iron Company, Limited on Front and First Streets. The Cowans brought skilled workers from Troy, New York, to help get the plant up and running. Town fathers provided a municipal ‘bonus’ of \$5,500.0 with the company making a commitment to employ a certain number of workers. Very quickly the company grew having a payroll larger than any other industry in the city.

After a fire in 1884, the Cowans rebuilt the plant, with the addition of a grey foundry in 1898.

Grinnell Co. of Canada Ltd. purchased the assets of Ontario Malleable Iron Co. in 1929 to acquire “made in Canada” capabilities. The company was a major supplier of castings to the McLaughlin Carriage Works, and later to General Motors. It was the first Canadian company to be organized by the United Steel Workers of America. The buildings covered over six acres of a large seventeen-acre parcel of land situate in Oshawa between Highway 401 and the downtown core. A lockout begun January 18, 1976 eventually resulted in the doors closing forever on March 16, 1977.

A portion of the old plant became home to Knob Hill Farms (owned by Steve Stavros) food wholesale outlet after receiving approval in 1981 from Durham Regional Council to convert the abandoned factory site. Two years later a 21,000 square-metre food outlet, served with railway spurs of both Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railway, opened. A pharmacy, bakery, dentist's office, video rental store, and a card shop also were original businesses on opening of the terminal. It closed in September 2000 along with all ten Knob Hill stores.

## Fittings Limited

Fittings Limited began as the Oshawa Stove Company which was established in 1873. It was located on 4 acres on Bruce Street in Oshawa and employed 15-20 men. In 1902, J.D. Storie, W.F. Cowan and H.T. Carswell bought the company and began manufacturing malleable and grey iron pipe fittings. It wasn't until 1910 that the name was changed to Fittings Limited.

Substantial additions were added at different times to the plant, particularly in 1904, 1911, and 1918, until some 22 acres of land was required for its operations.

The company produced pipe fittings until 1914 when the First World War began. The company hired extra men to manufacture shells for the war effort. After the war, the company employed approximately 650 men and returned to making pipe fittings as well as valves, drainage fittings, Rex high-pressure fittings, flanged fittings, electric conduit fittings, malleable conveyor chain and malleable and grey iron castings.

By 1927, the company had expanded to 22 acres which stretched from Court Street East to Drew Street, and from Bruce Street to Eulalie Avenue. In 1931, the company was incorporated with Dominion Charter under the name Fittings Limited. In 1956, the company expanded again, this time not in size but in the products they produced. After acquiring the Canadian Brass Company Limited as a wholly owned subsidiary, the Fittings Limited now manufactured waterworks fittings and plumbing brass goods in addition to their established product line. After a few years the company employed nearly 1000 people; 800 of them worked in Oshawa, the rest were engaged in Galt, Ontario, Red Deer, Alberta and Montreal, Quebec. Due to the many expansions and the amount of items they manufactured, the Fittings Limited became known as one of the largest manufacturers in Canada.

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Having earlier worked at D. Moore Stove and Foundry Company, Hamilton, 21-year old

John Storie migrated to Oshawa in 1875 to work at Ontario Malleable Iron Company. He eventually rose to the rank of General Superintendent of the chain department, becoming known through the region for his many inventions related to chain link machinery. He left Ontario Malleable in 1902 when he became co-owner of Oshawa Stove Manufacturing Company, located at the corner of Bruce and Charles Streets.

Then, with his three sons, Alexander, Stewart and Fred, John Storie established the Oshawa Steam and Gas Fittings Company which, in 1910, became Fittings Limited. What started out as a four-acre site grew to a 370,000 square foot factory on a 22-acre site, employing an average of 800 men and women.

Upon the death of patriarch James Storie in 1936, eldest son Alexander G. Storie became head of the company. Stewart and Fred retired from the company in 1945. Douglas Storie succeeded his father Alex as president and Donald Storie succeeded his father, Stewart as secretary-treasurer, while Edward took over plant management.

In 1946, Fittings Limited was incorporated as a public company, and in 1956 purchased Canadian Brass Limited of Galt, Ontario, with branch offices located in Montreal and Red Deer, Alberta.

Members of the Storie family were active in the Oshawa community serving in various capacities, sitting, for instance, as directors of community organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce, the Housing Commission, on the Oshawa General Hospital board, as well as membership in the Kiwanis Club, the Masonic Order, the Rotary club, and St. Andrew's United Church. In 1947 Alexander G. Storie gifted to the City of Oshawa the land on College Hill now known as Storie Park.

In an interview several years ago, Ed Storie, grandson of Fittings founder, recalled a company trend in hiring many immigrants from central/eastern Europe that included but a few

Italians. Of the Czech, Polish, and Ukrainian immigrants hired at Fittings, Storie unhesitatingly stated “they were always good workers and they didn’t mind getting their hands dirty.”<sup>5</sup>

### Organization of Labour in Ontario’s Foundries

In 1883, and then again in 1886, the Knights of Labor attempted to bring the moulder’s union to Malleable Iron but John Cowan, then manager, continued to employ non-union workers. After a bitter two-month strike, the union was in.<sup>6</sup>

Principally, skilled men led most working class struggle/protest of the era. Anti-union sentiment was common in Canadian industry, with strikebreaking becoming an art through the years 1901-14. Spies, detectives, and other crafty characters that reported to management every hint of union agitation had infiltrated the industrial workplace.<sup>7</sup> The use of strikebreakers and scab moulders by foundry establishments often led to violent and bloody clashes.

Through the years 1900-1923, the steel and iron industry in Ontario was strike-riddled, with strike activity peaking in 1919-20, 1928-29, and, following a period of dramatic labour unrest, in 1936-37.<sup>8</sup>

Most strike issues of the 1904-14 period revolved around defence of trade unionism, followed by demand for shorter work hours.<sup>9</sup> Overall, employers wished to quash trade protectionism, with southern Ontario manufacturers specifically targeting iron moulders in their anti-union mission.<sup>10</sup>

Through the Great War years, unionists linked their cause to the fight for democracy: “If the world is to be made safe for democracy... there must be economic democracy with political

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<sup>5</sup>Edward Storie; telephone interview July 2002.

<sup>6</sup>Gregory S. Kealey. *Workers and Canadian History*. McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>Heron, Craig and Bryan D. Palmer. “Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14” in David J. Bercuson, *Canadian Labour History*. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1987) 102.

<sup>8</sup>Drummond, Ian M., et al. *Progress Without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 241.

<sup>9</sup>Heron, Craig and Bryan D. Palmer. “Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14” in David J. Bercuson, *Canadian Labour History*. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1987) Table 3; 99.

<sup>10</sup>Heron, Craig and Bryan D. Palmer. “Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14” in David J. Bercuson, *Canadian Labour History*. (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1987) 103-104.

democracy,” stated one war-era union publication.<sup>11</sup> Some inroads were made, however unions suddenly found themselves with little influence or power shortly after the war. This was partially due to an overwhelming negative employer and public perception of workers, most notably those who were immigrants from Eastern Europe, and especially those within the steel/iron industry perceived to have been “poisoned with Bolsheviki propaganda.”<sup>12</sup>

These attitudes continued to have some negative impacts on Fittings and Malleable Iron’s Eastern European workers for some decades, in large part because foreign born workers were most often believed to be fanning the flames of revolution, and so were targeted by the press, by industry, and by society as anti-capitalist, anti-Canadian, or anti-American.

For a time, there was little development in the unionist’s cause with one source asserting that until 1940 “unionism and unions must have been marginal to the life and work of most Ontarians.”<sup>13</sup> For instance, in 1933 there were fewer unionists in Ontario than there had been in 1912.<sup>14</sup>

But, by the mid-1930s industrial unions began to resurface, with more skilled workers again leading the way.<sup>15</sup> Impetus in the latter part of the decade in union organizational activity came from the American Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). Rather than restricting efforts to unionize only certain skilled workers, the CIO concentrated its efforts on organizing all blue-collar workers.

Then, in 1937, the same year that the City of Oshawa came to a standstill with the General Motors strike, workers at Fittings and Malleable Iron signed their first collective agreements with the United Steelworkers of America (USWA), Local 1817, in May.

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<sup>11</sup> *American Federationist*, May 1917; qtd. In David Brody. *Steelworkers I America; the Nonunion Era*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 221.

<sup>12</sup> Heron, Craig. *Working in Steel*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988) 145.

<sup>13</sup> Drummond, Ian M., et al. *Progress Without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 240.

<sup>14</sup> Drummond, Ian M., et al. *Progress Without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987) 241.

<sup>15</sup> Heron, Craig. *Working in Steel*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988) 174.

As an aside: in January 1946, the USWA counted 70 Canadian plants under union contracts. By May, there were 86. The following month, the USWA added a new category to its membership: operations that were subject to the Modified Rand Formula (MRF). Of the four identified under the modified contract, two plants were located in Oshawa: Fittings, Limited and Oshawa Malleable Iron Co.

### Health and Safety

On January 1, 1915 Ontario enacted the Worker's Compensation Act. Though the Act has undergone revisions to reflect changing times/issues, it provides financial compensation for injured workers, whether injured in a specific incident, or suffering long-term injury/illness related to work and/or the workplace.

Between 1916 and 1920, 82 deaths, 410 permanently disabling accidents, and more than 9,000 less serious injuries were reported by the province's iron and steel industry.<sup>16</sup> With specific relevance to this historiography, there is no concentration of data that traces occupational accidents, injuries and fatalities at foundries, among foundry workers, for this period.

### Oshawa's Ukrainian Community

In the years after the second world war Oshawa was an enticing destination for the many immigrants seeking a permanent home. The presence of a large, well established Ukrainian community and the opportunity for employment in the automotive industry were key factors in considering Oshawa as a place to settle. However other considerations such as the presence of friends and relatives in the area, strong religious and social ties, as well as the reputation of Oshawa as a "Ukrainian town" were also contributing factors to the arrival of the displaced persons (DPs).

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<sup>16</sup> Heron, Craig. *Working in Steel*. (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1988) 50.

By the time the first of the DPs began arriving in Oshawa, the Ukrainian community had already been established some forty years. The first documented Ukrainian to immigrate to Oshawa was Julian Kalynko in 1907 who was shortly joined by 12 other families.<sup>17</sup> The Ukrainian community continued to expand and by 1928, two newspaper articles referred to the "large Ukrainian colony"<sup>18</sup> and quote Mayor Preston as praising the more than 1,000 Ukrainians in Oshawa<sup>19</sup>. Although it is difficult to ascertain the number of immigrants settling in the city after the war, census figures offer some indication of the size of the Ukrainian community in the years prior to, and after, the war.

The Ukrainian community was concentrated in the southern part of Oshawa along Bloor Street. Bloor Street (Base Line) was at one time the boundary between the town of Oshawa and the community of Cedardale. In 1924 Oshawa annexed Cedardale and became a city.

The Ukrainian community was located on Bloor Street between Simcoe Street South (western boundary) and Wilson Road South (eastern boundary). The city directory from 1949 indicates more than sixty Ukrainian surnames on the northern and southern sides of the street accounting for at least half of the residents. The streets to the immediate north and south of Bloor Street including Albany, Jackson, Front and Albert Streets were also heavily populated by Ukrainians. Located in this area were the many religious and social institutions which served the community including the Ukrainian National Hall, Ukrainian Labour Temple, Holy Mary Virgin Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church and Hall, St. John's Ukrainian Orthodox Church and Hall, Russian Ukrainian Pentecostal Church, Ukrainian Presbyterian Church, St. George's Greek Catholic Ukrainian Church, St. George's Hall, Ukrainian Club and St. Volodymyr and St. Olha Ukrainian Cemetery. A small retail sector also developed in the area with several grocers, hardware stores,

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<sup>17</sup> "Canadian Roots Celebrated by the Ukrainian Community", *Oshawa Times Extra*, May 15, 1991.

<sup>18</sup> "Will Erect Building in Spring with Temporary Quarters in Meantime", *Oshawa Daily Times*, January 25, 1928.

<sup>19</sup> "Club Hold Fine Banquet and Program at Welsh's". Although there is no date for the article, it can be dated to 1928 because of references to the Ukrainian Technical School which was then under construction.

coal dealers and restaurants serving the community. Several Ukrainians were proprietors of these businesses including George Kapluch, barber, S. Zadorozny, tinsmith and Alex Nikiforuk, Alex's Grocery.

The area initially attracted Ukrainians for the sole reason that it was near the manufacturing sector and hence, the employment opportunities. Thus, what developed in Oshawa was a working class neighbourhood with a high concentration of Ukrainians within a short distance resulting in the Ukrainian language retaining a high external profile.

Another factor which may have encouraged Ukrainian DPs to immigrate to Oshawa was the well established religious community. To Ukrainians of that time, religion and church were important components of community and family life and were often the focus of various social activities.

During this phase of Ukrainian immigration, settlement of the DP's within Canada was weighted towards areas where the best job opportunities, mainly industrial, were to be found. Oshawa's employment sector was largely manufacturing based and was led by the automotive giant General Motors and several other heavy industrial employers. Although there were no formal plans on the local level by Ukrainian religious or cultural institutions to aid DP's in coming to Oshawa, the tight knit Ukrainian community offered its support to welcome the new immigrants in any way possible.<sup>20</sup>

For some it meant providing assistance in obtaining employment. Probably the most well known member of the Ukrainian community at the time was Michael Starr (Starchewski), the son of Ukrainian immigrants and a City alderman from 1944-1949 and Mayor from 1949-1952.<sup>21</sup>

Mr. Starr was the M.P. for Oshawa when he became Labour Minister in the Diefenbaker government, the first cabinet minister of Ukrainian descent.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The Ukrainian Canadian Committee on the national level lobbied the government to allow immigration of the DPs.

<sup>21</sup> Mr. Starr, Personal Communication.

Michael Starr confirmed Oshawa City Council did not have any formal plans for bringing DP's to Oshawa; however, as a prominent member of the community, he was available to assist as much as possible. Much of this assistance was by way of obtaining employment for the immigrants eager to work. Mr. Starr mentioned in an interview that, for the most part, people were able to start work the next day.<sup>23</sup>

Employees who complained about the working conditions at Fittings claimed the majority of the employees were immigrants who feared for the jobs and therefore were reluctant to complain.<sup>24</sup> It has been suggested that this is one of the reasons why so many Ukrainians and other immigrants were hired by these firms. Most of the post-war displaced workers retired in the 1970s and 1980s, an era of economic hardship during which time some Oshawa industries closed shop.



For several reasons, Oshawa emerged as a major destination for many Ukrainian displaced persons arriving from Europe in the years after the Second World War. But the first documented Ukrainians settled in the city in 1907 and proceeded to build a strong ethnic community in the southern part of the city.

For the Ukrainians eager to work there was a wealth of employment opportunities in the manufacturing sector and within close proximity to the community. Many already had friends or relatives settled in the city that assisted with finding homes and employment. Another important element was the strong religious presence in the city which manifested in a number of Ukrainian churches representing several denominations. All of these elements combined in post-war Oshawa to create an ideal environment for settlement. The arrival of the displaced persons and the

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<sup>22</sup> "Oshawa's 7,000 Ukrainians Celebrate their own Heritage Day on Sunday", *Oshawa This Week*, November 18, 1981.

<sup>23</sup> Mr. Starr, Personal Communication.

<sup>24</sup> "Workers Tell Horror Stories About Plant", *Oshawa This Week*, June 13, 1990.

subsequent effect of their integration into the community are two of the main reasons the Ukrainian community in Oshawa is today celebrating more than 100 years in the City.

Of all the factories in Oshawa known for having large Ukrainian workforces, Fittings Limited was by far the most famous. At the height of its prosperity in the 1970's Fittings employed upwards of 1,000 people manufacturing for the automotive industry before the factory closed permanently in 1989. It was often a help to know someone employed at the factory and many Ukrainians mentioned hearing about jobs in this way.

### Oshawa's Polish Community

The centrepiece of the Polish community in Oshawa has largely been St. Hedwig Roman Catholic Church (built 1954), located on Olive Avenue at Central Park Boulevard South. Next to the church is the convent and across from these neighbouring buildings is St. Hedwig Roman Catholic Elementary School. All were built after the arrival of post-WWII Polish immigrants.

At that time, the neighbourhood embodied a microcosm of war-torn Europe as well as a manifestation of the post-war immigration boom. Among the Poles were Maltese, Italian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, German, Dutch, and Irish immigrants as well as long-established Canadian families. Also central to the community was *Oshawa Bakery*, located on Olive Avenue across the street from the church. There, people bought bread in a variety of eastern European languages, or in English.



As far back as 1851, there were residents in Oshawa who were of Polish descent. Through the years 1902-06, a number of Polish families came to work in the city's textile industry. By the time of the founding of the McLaughlin Motor Car Company in 1907, the predecessor to General Motors of Canada, Polish workers in Oshawa found employment in steel mills, foundries, and other feeder factories such as Ontario Malleable Iron Works.

Located on Front and First Streets, Malleable Iron was within walking distance of what had evolved into a Polish neighbourhood concentrated around nearby Olive Avenue, though residents of the neighbourhood were not exclusively Polish. Among the pre-war Polish community, Olive Avenue was termed *Marszałkowska* in direct reference to a major street in Warsaw.

Beginning in 1909, Polish priests were brought from Toronto to provide pastoral care to the Oshawa-area Polish families at the city's oldest Catholic Church, St. Gregory the Great, which was a considerable walking distance from the growing Polish neighbourhood. In 1928, Rev. Władysław Gulczynski was assigned as an assistant at St. Gregory's. That year, the Polish community began to discuss the issue of its own church.

In 1922 *The Polish Society of Fraternal Help* was established to provide mutual aid to members. Two years later, the name was changed to *The Polish Society in Oshawa*, and in 1925 construction began on a community hall on a vacant piece of land situated at 219 Olive Avenue. Volunteers constructed the building, opening in 1928, in time to welcome a wave of new Polish immigrants.

In 1938, several members broke from *The Polish Society in Oshawa* deciding to join with the national Polish organization, *The Polish Alliance of Canada* (PAC) as *Branch 16*. Eventually, the organization evolved to be *The Polish Alliance of Canada, Branch 21*. The organization endures today, though numbers are dwindling due largely to an aging membership.

Another organization, *The Polish National Union of Canada (PNUC), Branch 7*, was established in 1946, and in the summer of 1950, energized by increased membership and participation of post-war newcomers, construction began of the *PNUC* hall at 168 Banting Avenue, but a few blocks away from the Olive Avenue *Polish Alliance, Branch 21* hall.

The year the Olive Avenue hall opened (1928), a Polish language school and an amateur

theatre group, *Rozwoj*, were established. Also that year, formal organization of a Polish Roman Catholic Church began. Three delegates, two Poles and one Slovak, went to Toronto to meet with Archbishop Neil McNeil to discuss the possibility. Discussions with successive Archbishops and Cardinals continued through the 1930s, again in 1949, and in 1952.

The post-WWII population and organizational growth within the community had a positive impact on the discussions. In fall 1952, a special Mass was held and *St. Hedwig of Silesia*, popularly known as “the queen of the poor”<sup>25</sup> whose feast day is celebrated October 16th, was chosen to be the patron saint of the new parish. Immediately, the St. Hedwig Parish Choir was created. In the 1960s it expanded to include a children’s choir led by Sister Regina Marie, Principal of St. Hedwig Roman Catholic Elementary School and resident of the neighbouring convent, comprised mostly of students — not only children from Polish families — enrolled at St. Hedwig Elementary School. *St. Hedwig’s Choir and Glee Club* traveled throughout southern Ontario giving concerts of popular songs from such contemporary scores as “The Sound of Music” and “Oliver”. Three records were produced in 1968, 1969 and 1970, the first titled “They Call it Canada” and another exclusively devoted to Christmas Carols.

Just before Christmas, 1952, at a meeting attended by two hundred and twenty parishioners, it was decided to purchase a plot of land located on the corner of Olive Avenue and Wellington [now Central Park Boulevard South], for the sum of about \$4,000.00. Estimated cost of construction of a church on the site: \$100,000.00. By the New Year, an engineer and an architect had been commissioned and fund-raising activity begun in earnest.

Until the first Mass was formally celebrated in the lower church (basement) in 1954, a Polish priest traveled each week to Oshawa where he conducted mass in Polish language at the

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<sup>25</sup> Born in 1174, and given in marriage at age 12 to Henry, “The Bearded” Prince of Poland and Silesia, St. Hedwig died October 1243 after a life as benefactress to numerous churches, institutions and convents, as well her compassion and aid to the poor. After the death of her husband, she entered into one of the convents she financed where she lived her remaining years in prayer and self-denial. *Wotum Polonii w Oshawie, 1953-1961*. (Toronto: Polish Voice Co. Ltd., 1961) 5.

*Polish National Union Hall* on Banting Avenue. The church basement/hall boasts a performance stage, kitchen, and rooms where children attended Polish school and other cultural activities such as scouting. The construction of the upper church was not begun until July 1960, with the church officially dedicated on June 25, 1961. Christine Thomas, the Mayor of Oshawa wrote, in part, in a letter to the parish priest:

The dedication of a new Church will always be an event of importance in the life of a community. The people who have sacrificed and laboured to erect this fine building are to be commended.... In this modern world the spiritual influence must predominate if we are to survive.<sup>26</sup>

In 1964, St. Joseph Polish National parish—which does not recognize the Holy See—celebrated the blessing of its church located on Court Street. The following year, St. Hedwig parish permitted the Italian and Slovenian communities in Oshawa temporary use of St. Hedwig Church for the ministering of services in their native languages and, beginning in 1983, Portuguese language Mass was offered for Oshawa Roman Catholic Portuguese. This practice was abandoned in 1997.

The first local Polish library was established in 1931 as well as the first Polish choir, both at the Polish hall at 219 Olive Avenue. In 1933, ex-soldiers of the Polish Army, veterans of WWI and the 1920 war against Russia, established the *136th Regiment of the Polish Veterans in Oshawa* with the Polish hall on Olive Avenue as their base. It would be over thirty years before the Oshawa Polish ex-soldiers would have a place they could call their own.

The *General W. Sikorski Polish Veterans Hall*, located on Stevenson Road North in the north end of the city, broke ground June 17, 1967 and officially opened in November 1968. The facility largely serves the Polish community but is also rented for other community events. It is self-maintaining. It was at this location, on August 27, 2000, that Oshawa's Polish community gathered to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the forcible deportation of 1.5 million ethnic

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<sup>26</sup> Letter, 04 May 1961. Wotum Polonii w Oshawie, 1953-1961. (Toronto: Polish Voice Co. Ltd., 1961) 13.

Poles to Soviet labour camps, called *Sybiraki* – many of whom made Oshawa home – with an outdoor Mass conducted by two St. Hedwig parish priests and a guest priest visiting from Lublin, Poland, followed by a banquet. Over 500 attended the commemoration, including Polish veterans who came to specifically honour the victims of the Katyn massacre.

Several prominent members of the community and some dignitaries gave speeches calling to memory historic events, those who perished, as well stressing they not be forgotten.



In fall, 1938, the Felician Sisters began to have a presence in the Polish community of Oshawa and two Sisters undertook what would become a long-term commitment of the Felician Sisters to Polish-language schooling of children of the Polish community which, by 1939 had grown to sixty families. Around the same time, one of the rooms of a parish home was converted into a small chapel for Polish Catholics. In 1951, the Felician Sisters opened their first Novice School in Canada on Simcoe Street North, in Oshawa in a building owned by the McLaughlin family. It was decided by the parish community, in 1957, to donate several plots of land set aside for the church at Central Park Boulevard South for the construction of a convent and a Catholic elementary school. The convent became home to the Felician sisters in June 1958, and the school opened the following spring.

The Felician Sisters maintained a parish community presence, particularly in education teaching at Catholic schools in Oshawa, Ajax, and Pickering until July 1984. Only two Sisters remained in 2000 both working as teachers in the neighbouring cities, Whitby and Ajax. Neither was active in the parish community.

In 1992, the parish community was again served by three newly arrived Missionary Sisters of Christ the King, established in 1959 in Poland with a mission to serve Polish immigrants. The Oshawa chapter was the first Canadian location for the Sisters who served, in

1992, five parishes in the United States. The parish purchased a house located within the community, on Chadburn Street, and then, in 1995, purchased and renovated for the Missionary Sisters a house closer to the church on Olive Avenue.



In a 1941 agreement between Poland's General Wladyslaw Sikorski and Prime Minister Mackenzie King, one of ten information/recruitment offices was located in Oshawa for the purpose of recruitment of soldiers for a Polish provisional army.

Throughout the wars years, and beyond, the Polish community in Oshawa undertook various fundraising and other projects to aid Polish victims of war. Beginning in April 1942, *Polish Alliance (Branch 16)* collected funds to aid Polish deportees exiled in the Soviet Union. Four months later, the *Slavic Nations Committee of Oshawa*, comprised of members of the Czechoslovakian, Ukrainian, Russian and Polish ethnic communities, organized a rally to raise funds for victims of Slavic descent exiled in the Soviet Union; \$614.45 was collected. In 1944, the *Polish Women's Society of the PAC, Oshawa* through the *Polish Red Cross* raised \$100.00 for aid to Polish orphans recently arrived in Mexico. Through 1945, \$1,802.02 was raised by the umbrella organization representing all Oshawa-area Polish organizations, *The United Polish Relief Fund in Oshawa*. Clothing also was collected and shipped to Poles in transit in German displaced persons camps.

On November 20, 1946, Oshawa area farms welcomed the first group of Polish ex-soldiers, numbering twenty, who came to Canada on two-year labour contract under the British *Resettlement Act*. That Christmas, the local Polish Veterans' Association appealed to Oshawa-area Polish families to invite the new arrivals to their family traditional Christmas Eve *Wigilia* (vigil). Shortly thereafter, the Polish ex-soldiers began to make regular contact with the Oshawa Polish community, attending dances, etc. More Polish ex-soldiers trickled in.

Through 1949, the Polish community became aware of Polish refugees temporarily housed at the Ajax displaced persons transition camp (located at the DIL munitions site). In September, Rev. Jozef Kucharczyk traveled from St. Stanislaus Kostka Church in Toronto to celebrate a Mass at the camp. Three hundred people attended, including members of Oshawa's Polish community.

Although short-lived, the first Polish language radio program, *Polonia*, began transmitting from Oshawa in 1951 every Sunday evening for one hour from CKLB 1240. That year, 1,436 Oshawa residents were of Polish descent; 1,018 spoke Polish. In subsequent years, occasional hourly programming of Polish Christmas carols and other cultural performances were broadcast on other radio stations.

By 1956, the St. Hedwig parish community was well enough established that it could direct attention to issues unrelated to parish or *Polonia* obligations. Funds were raised to aid Hungarian refugees who fled after Soviet forces marched into the country to quash a failed uprising. In 1957, fund-raising activity was directed toward the "Bread for Poland" campaign, and through 1958 care packages of clothing were sent to Poland, this practice continuing into the 1980s. The parish community also was involved in 1979 in welcoming Vietnamese refugees to Oshawa.

In 1980, the Polish community of Oshawa made appeals for aid and for the acceptance into Canada of [political] refugees from Poland as well began fund-raising for the next wave of Polish newcomers. Through the 1980s, fund-raising efforts were also directed toward aid for Polish workers—likely linked to the cause of the *Solidarity* movement—as well for the poor in Poland. In March 1982, a *Refugee Sponsorship Committee* was established to support Polish immigrants to Canada. Other aid activities directed toward the homeland included the collection of shoes on "Shoe Sunday" in 1984 for children in Poland, the "Milk for the children of Poland"

project, 1986, and, \$20,000.00 raised in 1997 in response to an appeal for aid for flood victims in Poland. Ongoing was the offering of prayers “for the increased freedom of the Polish nation and other nations behind the iron curtain.”<sup>27</sup>

Most activities reflected keen community interest in preservation of Polish cultural and religious heritage within the parish community and toward the freedom of Poland from Soviet domination. Interest in local political matters had much earlier developed into active participation. In 1958 Rev. Felix Kwiatkowski and two parishioners ran as candidates for the local Catholic School Board. Around the same time, Rev. Kwiatkowski encouraged St. Hedwig’s parishioners to join the local chapter of the *Knights of Columbus*.

In September 1958, 200 students were enrolled in the newly constructed eight-room St. Hedwig elementary school built directly across the street from the church and employing several Felician Sisters resident in the neighbouring convent. Enrolment rose rapidly as in September 1960, 329 students attended the first day of classes. An additional four classrooms were hastily constructed. To reinforce cultural heritage among the young in the community, the *Polish Youth Group* was established in 1959, and several scouting groups in 1960.

During the May 3<sup>rd</sup> celebration of Poland’s Constitution held in 1966 at the *PNUC* hall on Banting Avenue, Jo Aldwinkle, Editor of *The Oshawa Times*, was sufficiently impressed with the artistic program that she agreed to undertake with parish member, Jan Drygała, a former delegate in Canada of the WWII Polish Government-in-Exile, the organization of an Oshawa-based ethnic festival. The *Multi-cultural Oshawa Folk Festival* was formally established a year later—a decade before Canada’s *Multicultural Act* was passed. The late Jan Drygała [d. 1996, age 82] received numerous awards and wide recognition for his efforts directed toward multicultural accord, including the *Order of Canada* in 1983.

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<sup>27</sup> Rev. Stanisław Poszwa. [transl. Helen Miklaszewski] *Events in the Life of St. Hedwig’s Parish and the Polish Community in Oshawa*. (Brantford: Bialas Printing Limited, 1997) 60.

By 1963, it was determined a coordinating body could well-serve the many Polish organizations existing in Oshawa and so *The Polish Organizations' Coordinating Council* was established for inter-organization communication as well for communication with the 35 other ethnic groups then also in existence in Oshawa. In September of that year the first weekly issue of the parish bulletin, *Zwiastun Parafii Sw. Jadwigi*, was published.

Evidence of the growing presence and public embrace of the Polish community in Oshawa was seen when, in 1964, in recognition of the May 3<sup>rd</sup> celebration of Poland's Constitution, the Polish flag was publicly flown at Oshawa City Hall.

A particularly poignant historical moment for the Polish community in Oshawa is found in the September 1969 visit and celebration of Mass at St. Hedwig Church by Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, Archbishop of Cracow, who came to Canada for the 25th Anniversary celebrations of the establishment of the *Canadian Polish Congress*; although, it wouldn't be until 1971 that a branch of the *Congress* would be established in Oshawa. Cardinal Wojtyla was more widely known as Pope John Paul II. In the parish Visitors' Book, Cardinal Wojtyla wrote:

As a remembrance of my visit to  
St. Hedwig parish in Oshawa,  
I give my heartfelt wishes  
for God's blessings for the Polish community,  
the priests and the sisters.<sup>28</sup>

Recognizing there was within the Polish community in Oshawa a growing ageing population, Sister Klara organized in 1976 the first meeting of parish senior citizens held at the Felician Sisters' convent.

As new arrivals came from Poland through the 1980s there was a revitalization of Polish language education with the establishment in September 1980 of the *Cyprian Kamil Norwid Polish Language and Culture High School* at Donevan Collegiate on Harmony Road, located

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<sup>28</sup> Rev. Stanislaw Poszwa. [transl. Helen Miklaszewski] Events in the Life of St. Hedwig's Parish and the Polish Community in Oshawa. (Brantford: Bialas Printing Limited, 1997) 67.

several blocks from the church. Eventually, the Durham Catholic District School Board International Languages Program took over the Saturday morning Polish language classes offered at Donevan for elementary school age children.

In 1988, with the organizational impetus coming from the 1980 newcomers, the Polish community established a branch of *St. Stanislaus and St. Casimir's Credit Union* which operated out of the church basement until 1990 at which time a permanent location was established in downtown Oshawa. It remains on Richmond Street.

Also during the 1980s, energies were directed toward renovations of the church; again spurred on by the [younger] Polish newcomers.



As families grew and children moved away to establish their own families, the Polish community of Oshawa spread beyond its origins at Olive Avenue, beyond the St. Hedwig parish boundaries. But it still remains for many among those for whom Polish is their mother tongue that the church is the vital centre of their spiritual, cultural, and social life.

#### Where do things stand today?

After a lockout that began in January, 1976, Malleable Iron closed up shop in March, 1977. A portion of the old plant became home to Knob Hill Farms, but this, too, closed in September 2000 along with all ten Knob Hill stores. Much of the structure remains. Currently, plans are afoot to begin an expedited environmental assessment as GO transit is looking to acquire the site for a future GO station. City officials indicate there is interest in constructing affordable housing in the area, with hopes of tapping into the federal Economic Action Plan.

In 1977, Fittings Limited was sold to Graeme Kirkland and Associates. One year later the plumbing division closed, laying off 113 people and transferring 37 others. The reason for

closing that part of the plant was because Fittings could not compete with cheaper imported products and the increasing popularity of plastic plumbing pipe.

By the 1980's the company was plagued with financial problems which only got worse. By 1989 the last 55 employees were laid off and the plant was closed. Later that year the plant suffered a fire on the west end of the building, and the next year the plant burned completely to the ground.

In 1990, the Fittings Limited building was demolished. Local citizens were worried about the pollutants and chemicals that were buried on the premises, such as PCB's and metal fragments while the demolition was in progress. The land was subject to extensive chemical studies. Findings included pollutants buried in the ground and barrels of PCB's sitting on the premises:

- soil contains metal fragments, also contains some old transformers with PCB tainted oil
- clean up would involve removing part of the soil for from the site
- was a dumping ground for the toxic chemicals used in steel manufacturing according to several workers who say they actually saw – and sometimes participated in – careless and risky disposal
- 17 hazardous chemicals were found in the derelict building in various quantities including asbestos, cyanide, and PCBs.

The company demolishing the building assured the people that the chemicals had been safely taken care of and there was no danger. Through the 1990s the site was subject to a remediation environmental cleanup. In 1996 the City passed the Preferred Urban Design Concept Plan which will allow the Fittings Site to be potentially developed with condominiums, stores and parkland.<sup>29</sup>

Since then, Medican's proposed Phase I of development plans for the north-east corner of the site – a 320-unit condominium – received municipal approval. Mixed residential –

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<sup>29</sup> Report to the Development Services Committee, City of Oshawa. DS-06-56, March 6, 2006, p. 6.

apartments, townhouses and single dwellings – are proposed for the remainder of the vacant lands, with an environmental assessment presently underway through the City of Oshawa to extend John Street through acquisition of some of the former Fittings lands. Meanwhile, all development projects are presently on hold due to the current economic conditions.

### Conclusion

This paper is but preliminary research as more work is required to mine the history of Oshawa and its many industries. We are interested in exploring more broadly and deeply the links between ethnic ties, class, family relations, spiritual connections as they relate to work and worker's lives in Oshawa. While the city is most know for its General Motors connections, the industrial economy and worker stories extend beyond the General Motors scope.

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