



ORIGINAL PAPER

The issue of teaching Polish in Brazil among diaspora regarding the political and historical background

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Abstract:

The Polish presence in Brazil dates back at least to the 17th century, but at the respective time there was no organized settlement in the then Portuguese colony. Organized migration to the independent Brazilian state dates back to 1870's.

It is accurately estimated that about 115 000 Poles had arrived in Brazil by 1933. These are approximate figures, mainly due to the fact that before 1918, Poles were very often classified according to their citizenship.

Polish education and the issue of teaching the Polish language played an important role in the social behaviour of Polish migrants. Importantly, as a rule, moving to an overseas superpower meant significant facilitation and, as a rule, the lifting of all restrictions on learning Polish for the younger generation. The essence of the problem for migrants was signified by the fact that school was usually the third building built by settlers in their new place of residence, right after their own house and church. It is worth noting that the main direction of Polish emigration to Brazil were the southern states: Parana, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul.

The aim of the article will be to show the circumstances in which the teaching of Polish language (as well as those of others minorities) evolved in Brasil regarding the political circumstances from XIX century until nowadays.

Keywords: *Polish diaspora, diaspora, politics, Brazil, language teaching*

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The Polish presence in Brazil dates back to at least the 17th century, but at that time there was no organised settlement campaign in what was then a Portuguese colony. Organised migration to the already independent Brazilian state dates back to 1870. The beginning of this wave of emigration is linked to the activities of Edmund Woś-Saporski, an emigrant from the Opole region, and more broadly to migration from the Prussian partition. At that time, Poles were migrating in order to avoid conscription into the Prussian army involved in the wars for the unification of Germany (1866, 1870), and another wave of migration followed after 1873 as a result of the first global economic crisis. Germany was particularly affected by this crisis, which is why the inhabitants of the newly formed Empire, regardless of their nationality, were quite willing to leave their places of residence, tempted by the opportunities that were to open up for them in the New World. The Brazilian government, which was looking for many new workers at the time, also encouraged potential settlers to come to Brazil, even funding the journey to Brazil for those who decided to change their place of residence.

As might be expected, the promises made by emigration agents were greatly exaggerated, but more than 100,000 Poles believed their assurances and the messages sent by those who had already settled there. It is estimated that by 1933, approximately 115,000 Poles had arrived in Brazil. These are approximate figures, mainly due to the fact that before 1918, Poles were very often classified according to their nationality (citizenship). This is the reason for the current problems related to, for example, granting citizenship to the descendants of emigrants. After 1918, migrants were classified without any problems as Poles.

Understandably, at that time, entire families tended to migrate, deciding to leave their previous centre of life while trying not to sever ties with their "old country". The accounts of emigrants clearly show that contact, usually by letter, was successfully maintained at least until 1939, but later, mainly due to the war and its consequences, but also due to a drastic change in Brazil's nationality policy, these contacts disappeared.

As already mentioned, the first organised Polish settlements in Brazil appeared in the 1870s, but the settlement process accelerated after 1888, i.e. after the abolition of slavery in that country. Anticipating a labour shortage and seeking to colonise the southern areas of the country, the Brazilian government decided on a series of incentives aimed at European societies to encourage them to move to Brazil. In addition to the state, colonisation was also driven by private entities such as railway companies, colonisation societies and even large landowners (Orzeł-Dereń, Sufa, 2021: 161).

On the other hand, Poles, who were then under partition, left their country for many reasons. First and foremost, economic reasons – there was a shortage of land in virtually all of the partitions, so rumours of the possibility of obtaining 25 hectares of land certainly appealed to the imagination of Polish peasants who were forced to farm with their large families on often much smaller plots of arable land. Essentially, the literature on the subject divides Polish emigration to Brazil into four phases.

The first – the so-called "Brazilian fever" – 1892-1909 – mainly involved migration from the Congress Kingdom (Russian partition).

The second phase, which began in 1895, involved peasants from Galicia [Austro-Hungarian Empire] (7,000-10,000 people);

The third phase, 1911-1912, involved 10,000 people from the Lublin region, the vicinity of Chełm and Podlasie. This was related to administrative changes, the separation of these areas from the Congress Kingdom and their direct annexation to Russia, which was associated with increased Russification.

Finally, the fourth wave consisted of all migration in the period after both world wars.

Polish education and the issue of teaching the Polish language played an important role in the social behaviour of Polish migrants. Importantly, moving to the territory of an overseas power usually meant significant facilitation and, as a rule, the abolition of all restrictions on learning Polish for the younger generation. The essence of the problem for migrants was evidenced by the fact that the school was usually the third building constructed by resettlers in their new place of residence, right after their own home and church. It is worth noting that the main destinations for Polish emigration to Brazil were the southern states: Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul.

The first schools were established even before the main waves of settlement, namely in 1876, with the arrival of settlers from the Opole region (Orzeł-Dereń, Sufa, 2021: 163), for whom the establishment of a school was a natural transfer of practices from their own area of residence – the Prussian partition was an area where education had long been compulsory. In Brazil itself, education was theoretically free from the very beginning of the state's existence, as the first constitution of the Brazilian Empire granted the right to four years of free education. This constitutional provision gave newcomers some room for manoeuvre, especially since, given the limitations in terms of infrastructure and personnel, there was no pressure to provide education in Portuguese (Plank, 1990: 538). In addition, Brazilian practice assumed a lack of co-educational teaching, which greatly increased the burden on education (G. H. G., 1877: 256). However, what was undoubtedly new was that teaching could be conducted exclusively in Polish. This was also permitted by the Brazilian authorities, who in this initial period did not insist on teaching in the national [Portuguese] language, due to the lack of sufficiently trained teachers. There was also a noticeable lack of teacher training institutions – the first attempts to organise them on a larger scale were observed in 1879. For this reason, teachers of local (Brazilian/Portuguese) origin concentrated their activities in areas with larger population centres and in the wealthier regions of the country, where local authorities could pay them satisfactory salaries. In 1877, even US newspapers considered them to be relatively high – from 400 dollars yearly (today around 13,500\$) at the time in the provinces to as much as 1,200 dollars per year (40 000\$) in the capital [Rio de Janeiro]. With seniority, numerous allowances were added to this. The 1824 Constitution left the issue of education to the provincial governments, so access to it was simply a function of the region's wealth. (Musacchio, Martinez Fritscher, and Viarengo, 2014: 735). It is known that in the period preceding the main wave of emigration, there were 20 schools in the vicinity of Curitiba where Polish was the language of instruction, and children were taught by volunteers – apart from providing school buildings, the imperial government did not interfere in the teaching process at all. In smaller towns, home schooling was practised, providing children with basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills. According to the testimony of one member of the Polish community, written down in 1947, who probably experienced these difficulties, teaching was simply done by willing individuals who had the opportunity to do so – usually the local church organist or even one of the farmers, who received additional remuneration from the state for this. Understandably, teaching was conducted in Polish, and the teaching of Portuguese depended on the teacher's language skills, so it must have been very limited (AMSZ, Brasil, 6, 92, 144a: 7). In addition, there may have been difficulties with learning to write, as emigrants from the Prussian partition were accustomed to writing in *Schwabacher* (Gothic alphabet), which was also used to write in Polish. An

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additional problem was the rather limited wages in local provincial education, which depended primarily on the size of the school – parents usually contributed 1 milreis to the teacher. It is estimated that the average salary of a teacher in southern Brazil was around 30-40 milreis, which was 1/3 of the salary of a civil servant. In addition, only part of this salary was paid in cash, with the rest being paid "in kind". For this reason, Polish migrants in the region were often warned that this was not a very lucrative profession (Groniowski, 1972: 185). A separate category of problems was the teacher's dependence on the parents who *de facto* sponsored them, which basically ruled out the spread of more radical social views among students, especially in the interior. This was noted primarily in the historiography of the 1970s, but from today's perspective, it seems that these were not particularly significant problems, as the most important thing was to preserve national consciousness among the diaspora.

Changes in education policy appeared in the new political situation in Brazil after the establishment of the republic and after the federalist revolution. The central government began to take a closer interest in what was happening in the south of the country, and for this reason, direct supervision of the education of young residents of the Coffee State was introduced. The change consisted in the state ceasing to finance schools that taught exclusively in languages other than Portuguese. Portuguese was introduced into schools as a compulsory subject for all pupils, but at least part of the curriculum was allowed to be taught in the languages of national minorities. The change also affected teaching methods, with educational authorities gradually beginning to favour (including financially) a style of teaching that seems obvious to us today – individual year groups learn separately, studying specific subjects with a strictly defined number of hours. This required schools to have better infrastructure and a larger teaching staff. Naturally, this favoured state education, which had a better financial base than provincial private schools. (Musacchio, Martinez Fritscher, and Viarengo, 2014: 738). (Before World War I, Polish was taught both in schools run by private individuals (secular), whose number in 1918 was estimated at 106 (AMSZ, Brazil, 6, 92, 144: 22)., and in schools established and supervised by the Church, which were usually based on the parish network. Nevertheless, secular schools had a significant advantage, with a ratio of 11:3 (Pabis, 2017:186). The most important school was the Nicolaus Copernicus College in Marechal Mallet, Paraná, founded in 1911(AMSZ, Brazil, 6, 92, 144: 22). It was estimated that a total of about 5,000 children were educated in these schools. As mentioned, the vast majority of these schools were private and were mainly funded by public donations.

After World War I, these rules were extended to private education, which was required to teach the official language on a daily basis, as well as Brazilian history and geography, also in Portuguese. As Paweł Nikodem mentions in his account, this happened in 1919 ((AMSZ, Brazil, 6, 92, 144: 8). It was state legislation, but it was applied throughout southern Brazil and, as mentioned, it was introduced with immediate effect, without any adjustment period.

This posed a serious problem for the minority, as the "supply" of Brazilian teachers was limited, which led to: on the one hand, a reduction in school provision, especially in more remote parts of the country, where local education systems encountered problems in securing staff; on the other hand, it prompted schools to organise themselves into educational associations coordinating teaching in both languages. As a rule, in order to facilitate the work of teachers lecturing in both languages, lessons were organised in two blocks: morning and afternoon, one of which was conducted in Polish and the other in Portuguese (Pabis, 2017: 188). In the accounts of those who participated

in this teaching, there are various reports regarding the duration of individual teaching blocks. Some say that it was 3 hours in the morning and 2 hours in the afternoon; other witnesses mention that teaching lasted from 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. and, after a lunch break, from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. This allowed for the relatively effective use of available human resources. These rules were codified in 1932, with the aim of standardising Polish education in Brazil and facilitating cooperation between schools. It was a year of educational reforms both in Poland and, as we can see, in Brazil. It is worth mentioning that in Brazil, the drive for educational reform was led by the newly established (1930) Ministry of Health and Education, which was allocated significant funds by Brazilian standards – 10% of tax revenue at the national level, plus 20% of tax revenue at the state level (McCoy, 1959: 40).

The educational offer included 349 Polish schools, of which 18 taught exclusively in Polish; 37 schools taught only in Portuguese, while 294 institutions taught both in Polish and Portuguese (Orzeł-Dereń, 2017: 166–167).

Basically, teaching was conducted in:

- a) kindergartens;
- b) primary schools with bilingual teaching;
- c) colleges: teaching at a slightly higher level than Brazilian schools, with elements of Polish language, geography and history, etc.

In principle, the level of education in Brazilian schools was assessed as corresponding to that of a Polish seven-year school, but we must remember that, as in Poland, the level of education in these schools was uneven, depending on the level of the teachers, who were recruited both from the local Polish community and from people sent from Poland (Gołdyn, 2024). In the period preceding the outbreak of World War I, education was not uniformly organised, and there was also a debate about what the curriculum should cover, how long school should last, etc. This probably shows a certain incompatibility with the Brazilian education system at the time. As a rule, teaching was carried out in two classes, with the vast majority of pupils learning together, similar to some schools in rural areas of Poland.

Textbooks and teaching aids were both imported from Poland and prepared locally, taking into account local characteristics.

The first textbook used for teaching was a hornbook by Heronim Durski, published in 1893 (Durski, 1893). It anticipated the new educational conditions, as it assumed teaching in two languages – Polish and Portuguese. It is known that it remained in use for over 10 years. (Gronowski, 1972; 201). Interestingly, the textbook was financed by the Polish diaspora and published in Poznań, where the necessary printing facilities were probably available. In addition to books published "locally", textbooks imported from both Poznań and Galicia were also widely used. Durski's primer was important in that it familiarised the colonists, at least to a limited extent, with basic information about Brazil and its economic system – it contained important practical information about currency and the traditional system of weights and measures, information necessary for proper functioning in the society of the host country (Durski, 1893, 96-97). This information was missing from textbooks imported from Europe, which should therefore only play a supporting role, serving rather to maintain sentimental ties with the old country.

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This system applied to a large part of the population of southern Brazil – it is estimated that between 1884 and 1931⁴, approximately 115,000 people from Polish territories arrived in Brazil (Goczyła-Ferreira, 2019: 60). However, this is only a rough estimate, mainly due to the fact that only those who arrived after 1918, i.e. those who had migration documents issued by the Polish state, were officially registered as Poles. People who arrived earlier are more difficult to capture in statistics. Nevertheless, until the end of the interwar period, the scale of migration was significant – at the end of the 1930s, the Polish shipping company GAL [Gdynia-Ameryka Shipping Line] purchased two new ships dedicated to serving the South American line – *Chrobry* and *Sobieski*.

The Polish diaspora educational system, established in 1932, including, of course, the teaching of the Polish language, survived until May 1938, when Brazilian President Getulio Vargas introduced nationalisation decrees as part of the construction of *the Estado novo*, effectively depriving all national minorities of the opportunity to learn their native language. The decrees were the aftermath of the failed *integralist revolution* of May 11, 1938. (Diffie 1969: 46). This politics was called „Nationalism by elimination” – term coined by Roberto Schwarz, more or the less it referred to creation a “pure” Brazilian community by denying any scent of the foreign influence (Lesser, 1994: 25) . The introduction of this solution was a consequence of the discourse visible in Vargas' administration concerning the dispute over the future model of development for the Brazilian state. Within this discourse (Lesser, 1994: 24), at least three opposing views can be distinguished: the first, ‘traditional’ view, represented by large landowners, advocated maintaining migration in order to ensure a steady supply of labour, which would probably be associated with maintaining the existing relative freedom of education. The second tendency was the opposite of the first – its supporters advocated ending the period of free migration and tightening educational regulations due to the need to create loyal Brazilian citizens. Finally, the third option was represented by foreign powers (mainly the US and the UK) who saw Brazil, and South America more generally, as a place to resettle minorities from Europe and the Middle East who, for various reasons, were not wanted in their own countries (Lesser, 1994: 25). Vargas's decrees meant, above all, that Polish language teaching was relegated to the sphere of home education. From then on, schools were required to teach in Portuguese, and foreign language learning was prohibited until the age of 14, which meant that it was only available in secondary school, which was very difficult to access, especially in rural areas (Pabis, 2017: 190-191). Furthermore, teachers had to be Brazilian citizens, which excluded people who had arrived directly from the "old country"; only those born in Brazil were granted citizenship [this situation prevailed until the 1980s]. More repressions were announced in Edict No. 1545 of 25 August 1939, which banned languages other than Portuguese from the public sphere. In order to break up the previously compact settlements inhabited by the descendants of migrants, it was also decided to settle Brazilians within migrant communities (Diffie, 1969: 461).

An additional burden was Vargas's announcement in November 1938, when he suggested further tightening of immigration policy—a policy that had already been subject to constant revisions, at least since the 1920s, with the aim of reducing emigration (HO 45/15515,). In his speech delivered on the occasion of the first anniversary of the proclamation of the *Estado Novo*, the President of Brazil described the existing

⁴ In 1931, further immigration to Brasil was suspended due to the world's economic crisis, It was resumed later but taking into account much stricter regulations.

immigration policy as insufficiently restrictive and announced its tightening (BDoFA, II/d, 19, doc. 50).

It can be argued that the Polish language was in a difficult situation, as the overall picture was compounded by the geopolitical situation in which Brazil and Poland found themselves in *de facto* opposing camps, which further influenced the cautious approach to learning and using their native language by the Polish diaspora in Brazil.

The edicts were implemented immediately in larger towns, i.e. where there were sufficient human resources, while in remote areas, probably due to a lack of supervision, but also a lack of human resources capable of teaching exclusively in Portuguese, the reform was implemented gradually, as far as possible. Interestingly, accounts collected last year from the next generation of Poles in Brazil paint an interesting picture of the Vargas dictatorship, which is remembered as a period when "people lived well" and there was little interference in national affairs (this indirectly indicates a "more relaxed" approach to the issue in the interior). This generally positive image of Vargas stemmed from his application of corporatist principles, which were, incidentally, similar to those implemented in Salazar's Portugal. A program of far-reaching social reforms was implemented, which proved quite appealing to the population, especially in the deeply underdeveloped Brazilian *interior*. (Loewenstein, 1969; 444). A similar situation can also be observed, for example, in certain regions of Greece, especially on the smaller islands, where the rule of the "black colonels" is remembered with a certain fondness, precisely because of the extensive investment program in the provinces.

The issue during the Polish People's Republic

In the period after 1945, teaching Polish was seriously hampered – primarily due to legislation that effectively ruled out the possibility of learning Polish as a minority language. and as a result of the war, most connections with the "old country" had been lost. For this reason, the burden of teaching Polish was shifted to home inculturation and Sunday lessons given to the local community by Polish priests (Goczyła-Ferreira, 2019: 62), whose attitude towards People's Poland, incidentally, was often not entirely negative. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the staff of the Polish diplomatic mission, who were completely uninterested in cooperating with the diaspora organisations that had survived the period of nationalisation of social life in Brazil, made a rather negative impression on the local Polish diaspora. This inevitably caused at least some reserve among the local Polish community (AMSZ, 6, 92, 144: 30) .

The situation changed after 1980, following Pope John Paul II's visit to Brazil, which, according to those involved, changed the perception of Poland and Poles in Brazilian society. This was further reinforced by the democratisation of relations after 1985. Nevertheless, the full revival of mutual relations and opportunities to learn Polish took place after 1989, with Poland becoming more open to the Polish diaspora, but also with the emergence of Polish organisations, which, among other things, began to coordinate and organise Polish language teaching in their areas of operation. The diaspora also began to use the language of their ancestors more willingly, which in some cases was still treated as the first language that children began to use in their development. Interestingly, it seems that this is now easier again and is limited only by the local internet speed. According to testimonies from representatives of the diaspora – Brazilians of Polish origin – the disappearance of the Polish language in *the interior* actually accelerated only with electrification, i.e. when access to local television and radio became

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easier, which at that time was inevitably broadcast almost exclusively in the local language⁵.

Present times/conclusion

On the Polish side, the teaching of Polish is currently coordinated by ORPEG (Centre for the Development of Polish Education Abroad), an organisation that is active wherever the Polish diaspora operates and . Teachers delegated by this organisation primarily coordinate the teaching of Polish in their respective areas, providing methodological assistance to "local" teachers from the diaspora. The presence of Polish teachers in Brazil is extremely important, but it is worth noting that they teach contemporary Polish, which will certainly be useful in the future for those who complete the courses in their further professional work. However, an inevitable effect of increasing the presence of Polish teachers abroad will be the disappearance of local versions of the Polish language, which have been preserved in the diaspora in conditions of limited contact with the mother country. The importance of the Polish diaspora and the Polish language itself for local communities is symbolically emphasised by the introduction of Polish as a second official language in the Brazilian municipalities of Aurea and Guarani das Missões (2024-2025).

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⁵ Currently, in towns inhabited by the Polish diaspora, there are radio stations broadcasting local programmes in Polish, e.g. in Aurea, Araucaria and Guarani das Missões.

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