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*The Remuneration of Polish Teachers
in Brazil on the Eve
of President Getúlio Vargas'
Nationalization Laws (1938)*

ABSTRACT

The article presents the situation of Polish teachers who worked in Brazil in the latter half of the 1930s, shortly before President Getúlio Vargas introduced nationalization laws. Based on archival sources, chiefly teachers' questionnaires, the author discusses the working conditions of teachers working in Polish schools abroad, their remuneration, presenting their salaries in respect of their residence, type of school, and gender. The article underscores, albeit indirectly, how this professional group has been helping sustain Polish language and culture among the Polish diaspora in Brazil. It follows that the work of Polish teachers in Brazil might have been pro bono, or even missionary – it was a manifestation of their commitment to preserving the Polish national identity in the Polish emigration communities, despite financial hardships and imminent political changes. The article is an important contribution that facilitates the exploration of the history of the Polish community in Brazil and its educational activities in the interwar period.

KEYWORDS: Polish Brazilians; Polish schooling system abroad; Polish teachers in Brazil; Polish emigration; Getúlio Vargas; nationalization laws; remuneration of teachers

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Polish emigration to Brazil dates back to the 1860s and 1870s, but the largest influx of Polish immigrants took place in the last decade of the nineteenth century and also before the World War I. After the Polish state was revived, it was able to extend its protection to Poles who had lived in Brazil for several decades. In 1920, official diplomatic relations were established, and the General Consulate of the Republic of Poland was created in Curitiba, the Parana state's capital and the major location for Polish Brazilians (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Poles formed the largest communities in three southern states in Brazil: Parana, followed by Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. The latter hosts the least number of Poles, although the first Polish immigrants came to settle in this state. Other Brazilian regions welcomed much smaller communities of Polish immigrants. The documents available in the Archives of Modern Records, Warsaw, which were originally compiled by Rev. Józef Góral at the request of Polish diplomacy, prove that until the 1920s the community of Polish Brazilians counted approximately 120 thousand people. According to those data, Parana became a new home for around 66 thousand settlers from Poland; around 36 thousand Poles came to live in Rio Grande do Sul, whereas Santa Catarina welcomed about 14 thousand of them. In other regions (São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro), the population of Polish descent was estimated at around 4 thousand (Spisy ludności, 1928, pp. 205–210). Larger figures were quoted by Kazimierz Głuchowski, the first Polish consul in Curitiba. He estimated that in the 1920s the total number of Polish Brazilians inhabiting only the three southern states was over 180 thousand – ca. 100 thousand in Parana, over 61 thousand in Rio Grande do Sul, and nearly 19 thousand in Santa Catarina (Głuchowski, 1927, pp. 107–109). These figures might be

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exaggerated because during the interwar period in Poland about 41 thousand Poles emigrated to Brazil (Mazurek, 2006, pp. 63, 65). The information supplied by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 1939 shows that approximately 90 thousand Poles dwelt in Parana, around 80 thousand in Rio Grande do Sul, and 23 thousand in Santa Catarina. Elsewhere, Poles formed a community of about 4 thousand. The ministry estimated that on the eve of the Second World War, Brazil was home to no more than 200 thousand Poles (Konsul Generalny RP w Kurytybie, 1939, pp. 23–27).

The vast majority of immigrants who settled in Brazil were peasants, mostly landless and smallholders. They were variously motivated, but mostly by insufficiency of farmland and overpopulation of the Polish countryside. Members of the intelligentsia were scarce among the immigrants, so the first Polish organizations started to emerge two decades after the first wave, and schools slightly later. In practice, it was only when Poland regained independence and the consulate was established that Polish associations and other organizations appeared more quickly (Głuchowski, 1927, pp. 129–151). Most of them were school societies, intended primarily to run schools, mainly through fund-raising for their daily operations and salaries for teachers.

Of course, Polish schools had been set up before the consulate was established, but the development of Polish school education in Brazil vastly exceeds the scope of this paper. This area has not been thoroughly researched so far, although there are a good number of valuable publications on the subject. The major works include studies by Głuchowski (1927, pp. 151–176), Wachowicz (1970; 2002), Malikoski and Kreutz (2015; 2016), and Orzeł-Dereń and Sufa (2021). Nonetheless, after the consulate was created, the everyday life of Polish Brazilians and the functioning of Polish organizations and schools became more intense. Polish diplomacy supported local emigrant circles and was instrumental in the consolidation of the societies, hence those operating under the auspices of schools. But the role of the General Consulate

in Curitiba was extremely important in another respect. The documentation available at the Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw demonstrates how much effort clerical workers used to make to collect information about our compatriots in Brazil. The documentation from the 1930 is a perfect example of that, especially documents from the latter half of that decade. We find in them very interesting materials concerning Polish schools in Brazil. They were typically small, one- or – less frequently – two-, three-, or four-grade establishments. They were located in those Brazilian states where Polish immigrants dwelt in the largest numbers: Parana, Rio Grande do Sul, and Santa Catarina. More importantly, though, this documentation also relates to detailed surveys of teachers who worked in such schools. It contains such important data as the remuneration of Polish teachers in tabulated form and the sources of such income. Although based on archival (historical) sources, such compilations make it possible to draw some comparisons and carry out analyses. I am aware that a more detailed examination of the teachers' remuneration would necessitate much larger studies, also comparative ones. The nature of this publication makes this impossible, but the presented paper can serve as a starting point for in-depth historical and economic research including Polish Brazilians.

So let us look at the remuneration of teachers working in Polish schools in Brazil. For this, we shall examine consular questionnaires completed by such teachers ("*Evidencja nauczycieli polskich*," 1934–1938). The surveys were dated March and April 1938, just as the federal government was implementing nationalization laws, which were designed to accelerate the assimilation of immigrant communities into Brazilian society. This policy applied to Polish Brazilians, too. Specifically, non-Brazilian associations were banned and the use of Portuguese was now mandatory. Private schooling facilities which did not meet the new requirements and tightened regulations had to be closed down (Krasicki, 1983; Smolana, 1998, p. 168).

Before we address the topics outlined in the paper's title, it should be noted that the questionnaires were filled out by 336 teachers who worked in 264 schools. We can reasonably ask whether those figures accurately represented the number of schools and their employees. Probably not (Landmann, 2024, p. 104; Malczewski, 2025; Malikoski and Kreutz, 2015, p. 55), but the amount of the data collected is quite significant. The questionnaires contain information such as the teachers' citizenship, place of birth, age, education, marital state or family. However, questions were also asked about the remuneration and the donors. Those amounts were given in Brazilian reals (réis) and often simplified. For example, a salary of 100 thousand reals would be reported as "100 milrejsów" (Pol. "milrejs" = Port. "milréis" = 1,000 réis).

Let us first analyze information on the aggregate remuneration of teachers employed by schools operating in the Polish communities of Brazil. Our survey of the sources suggests that such figures were reported by nearly all teachers who completed the questionnaire. Of the 336 teachers questioned, salary details are missing for two of them. Antoni Grzegorek, who taught in a one-form school in the little town of São Feliciano, Rio Grande do Sul, did not reveal his salary ("Ewidencja nauczycieli polskich," 1934–1938, p. 319). Another respondent who did not state their earnings was an anonymous Bernardine sister teaching in a two-grade school in São Feliciano, run by Bernardine Sisters ("Ewidencja nauczycieli polskich," 1934–1938, p. 325). Table 1 and Figure 1 present the number and percentage of teachers in accordance with their earnings.

It must be remembered, though, that the majority of teachers working in private schools were not remunerated during summer vacation, which in Brazil falls in December and January. This attitude of school governing bodies would to situations where a new teacher had to be found when a new school year was beginning, as evidenced by minutes taken in the meetings of societies

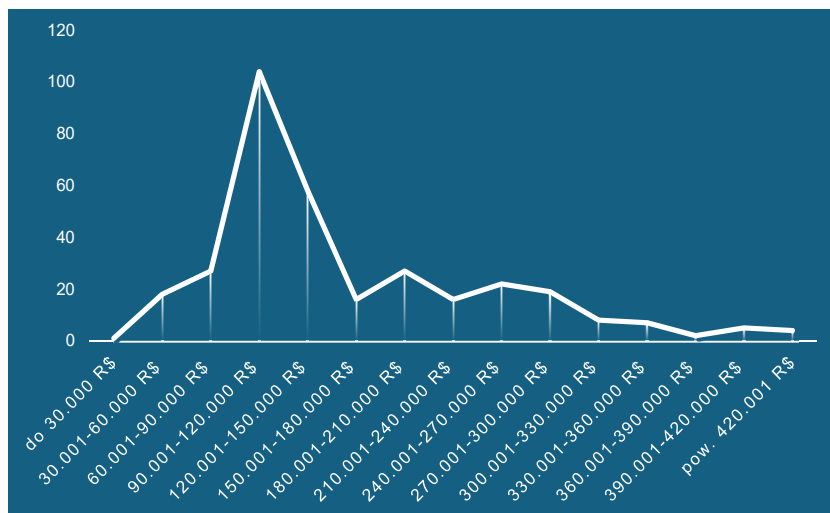
running schools. This was the case, for example, in the Freedom Society (Towarzystwo “Wolność”) in Irati, Parana (Nowicki, 2025, pp. 560–562).

Table 1 Polish teachers in Brazil, by salary
(based on questionnaires from 1938).

Remuneration	No. of teachers	%
up to 30,000 R\$	1	0.30%
30,001–60,000 R\$	18	5.39%
60,001–90,000 R\$	27	8.08%
90,001–120,000 R\$	104	31.14%
120,001–150,000 R\$	58	17.37%
150,001–180,000 R\$	16	4.79%
180,001–210,000 R\$	27	8.08%
210,001–240,000 R\$	16	4.79%
240,001–270,000 R\$	22	6.59%
270,001–300,000 R\$	19	5.69%
300,001–330,000 R\$	8	2.40%
330,001–360,000 R\$	7	2.10%
360,001–390,000 R\$	2	0.60%
390,001–420,000 R\$	5	1.50%
over 420,001 R\$	4	1.20%
TOTAL	334	100.00%

Figure 1 illustrates the data in the table above even more vividly. It clearly shows that nearly a third of teachers who worked in Polish schools in Brazil in the 1930s received monthly salaries of 90–120 thousand reals, most often exactly 100 thousand reals. This was earned by 79 teachers (nearly 24% of the whole sample).

Figure 1 Polish teachers in Brazil, by salary
(based on questionnaires from 1938).



At this point, one might want to ask about the average monthly salary. It is impossible in the case of two directors of teaching colleges in Curitiba and Mallet, who were paid in Polish złoty. Władysław Radomski (*"Ewidencja nauczycieli polskich,"* 1934–1938, p. 6), Director of Henryk Sienkiewicz College, earned 450 złoty, and Stanisław Postek (*"Ewidencja nauczycieli polskich,"* 1934–1938, p. 10) earned 410 złoty. These amounts would heavily impact the average, as their salaries were equivalent to 1,427 and 1,300 reais, respectively. The conversion was made on the basis of data provided by the National Bank of Poland, which shows that in 1939, 1 Polish złoty was worth 3,171 Brazilian reais (GUS, 1939, Table 45, p. 236). After we exclude the two high earners, it transpires that the average monthly salary of Polish teachers in Brazil was nearly 163 thousand reais in 1938. With these two employees taken into account, the average salary would increase to 170 thousand reais. On the other hand, if we disregard the large

group of religious sisters teaching in schools operated by Polish congregations, where salaries were markedly lower than those of secular teachers, the average monthly salary of teachers would rise to approximately 181,000 reals. Was it a lot or rather little? This question can be answered by comparing this figure with the mean salary paid by Brazilian schools. Their salaries differed widely because earnings of teachers were regulated and differed markedly between states and municipalities, and many specific amounts can be found only in local files or official documents. Interestingly, we can trace information on the purchasing power of the Brazilian real of that time. The following list presents several parameters that give an idea whether a salary paid by a Polish school in 1938 in Brazil was sufficient (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 1990; Câmara dos Deputados, 2025).

- In the 1930s, teachers in a Brazilian schools earned from 250,000 to 480,000 reals.
- Brazilian civil servants or a lower-level teachers earned **from 150,000 to 250,000 reals**.
- A loaf of bread cost from **150 to 200 reals**.
- One kilo of beef cost from **1,000 to 1,200 reals**.
- One liter of milk cost around **400 reals**.
- A tramway fare in a large city cost **from 200 to 300 reals**.
- The daily wage of an unskilled laborer was **from 5,000 to 7,000 reals**.

We can therefore assume that the average remuneration of a Polish teacher in Brazil was rather modest but fell within the brackets of average monthly salary obtained by a Brazilian civil servant or a lower-ranking teacher, and such were the majority of the teachers discussed in this paper.

No doubt the group of over 300 Polish teachers included those who earned either decent or even high salaries. The highest-earner (apart from teachers remunerated by the consulate in Polish złoty) was Jan Specjalski. He taught in two schools in the settlement of Linha Prima, Municipality of Ijuí, Rio Grande do Sul. The school

run by the St. Anne Society paid him as much as 466 thousand reals, the school of the St. Isidore Society rewarded him with a salary of 160 thousand reals, so his earnings from both schools totaled 626 thousand reals. Perhaps his salary was so high because he also held the position of the district school superintendent ("*Evidencja nauczycieli polskich*", 1934–1938, pp. 265, 266). The teacher who earned the least was Stanisław Kępczyński from Treze de Maio, Municipality of Blumenau, Santa Catarina. The school was run by St. Stanislaus Society and paid him only 25 thousand reals per month. Such earnings could not have been the only source of Kępczyński's income, as he would not have been able to make ends meet ("*Evidencja nauczycieli polskich*," 1934–1938, p. 230).

Let us now look at teachers' average earnings, considering their gender distribution. It turns out that male teachers were paid much more – 199,272 reals on average. Female teachers earned only 133,438 reals. However, if we exclude two directors from our calculations, and the nuns whose earnings were significantly lower, the average salary of a teacher working in a Polish educational facility in Brazil in 1938 would be almost 163,000 reals per month. The average earned by women teachers would be less than that of their male colleagues, yet it would not be so radically low because teachers' average salary was 170 thousand reals at the time.

A look at the marital status of the teachers in question in the context of their earnings brings interesting conclusions. They can be divided into unmarried citizens (bachelors and spinsters), married persons, widows, and member of the clergy (mostly religious sisters). We do not know, however, the marital status of many of the teachers.

Table 2. Mean salaries of teachers (réis), by marital status in 1938.

Teachers' Marital Status	Mean salary (réis)	No. of teachers	%
single	203,026	55	16.4%
married	243,665	58	17.0%
widow	130,000	3	0.9%
nun/priest	113,804	92	27.4%
n.d.	163,925	126	38.4%
Total	170,100	336	100.0%

The data presented in Table 2 demonstrate that married individuals were the best-earning group. Their mean salary was nearly 244 thousand reals per month, close to the upper band of the mean salary earned in Brazilian schools of lower levels. Single teachers earned fairly decently, but widows were paid much less (only 130 thousand reals). Three widow teachers are attested by the source at hand. The mean salary was lowered by members of the clergy, the 89 nuns in particular, whose proportion in this category was nearly 97 per cent. The three priests who taught at school were not Roman Catholic priests, but represented the Polish-Catholic Church, yet their monthly salaries were not too high, either (70, 100 and 150 thousand reals respectively) (*"Ewidencja nauczycieli polskich"*, 1934-1938, pp. 181, 242, 254). The average salary of the teachers whose marital status is unknown to us earned the amount close to the average of the whole group under our scrutiny.

Polish schooling in Brazil was a private sector of varying levels of organization. As mentioned before, Polish schools in Brazil were usually run by school societies established in towns or even smaller settlements inhabited by immigrants from Poland. The questionnaires taken in 1938 show that of the 264 recorded schools as many as 205 establishments (77.7%) were run by school societies. More often than not, schools were set up by female religious

congregations (36 of 264, 13.6%); less frequently, they were run locally by municipal communities which were not formally associated, sometime parish committees, private individuals, or even organizations based in Poland. So, what salaries were offered by Polish schools run by various institutions?

Table 3. Mean salary of Polish teachers in Brazil in 1938, by school governing body.

Governing Body	Mean	No. of teachers	%
society	196,529	224	67.1%
religious congregation	113,333	90	26.9%
settlement	81,833	6	1.8%
other	124,444	9	2.7%
n.d.	196,000	5	1.5%
Total	170,100	334	100.0%

The average salary of teachers working in schools run by societies and associations (often established precisely to run schools) was around 196,5 thousand reals. Overall, such schools employed the largest number of teachers. Obviously, calculating an average is slightly misleading because this category includes teachers who earned either very high or very low salaries. Similar remuneration was paid to teachers who worked in school run by unknown entities. Those might have been societies, too, but the questionnaires do not say. As shown in Table 3, if a school was run by a settlement which had no specially appointed body to run it, teachers were paid very poorly. Nuns, too, earned very little from teaching, perhaps because they did that work as their vocation. As regards establishments operated by other institutions, the prominent position is occupied by the school in Morska Wola, a Polish settlement founded and administered by the Polish Maritime and Colonial League (Białas, 1983, pp. 196–208). The teacher employed

in this place received an impressive 400 thousand reals monthly ("Ewidencja nauczycieli polskich", 1934-1938, p. 107). This average was reduced by schools run by other bodies. The Morska Wola teacher excluded, the mean salary in this category is 90 thousand reals per month.

As mentioned earlier, the schools in question were largely one-grade establishments (207, i.e. 78.4% of the total number), sometimes two-grade (23; 8.7%). Larger Polish schools were rare, but the questionnaires suggest that before the independent Polish schooling system was dismantled, 9 such schools were in operation (3.4% of the total number examined), which offered education at a slightly higher level. The questionnaires sometimes recorded preschools, so let us have a look at teachers' earnings in regard to school category (Table 4).

Table 4 Mean remuneration of Polish teachers in Brazil in 1938, by school type.

School Type (no. of grades)	Mean Salary (réis)	No. of teachers	%
preschool	113,333	9	2.7%
1-grade school	169,799	203	60.8%
2-grade school	178,273	44	13.2%
3-grade school	123,947	38	11.4%
4-grade school or larger	219,427	40	12.0%
Total	170,100	334	100.0%

This compilation shows an increase in mean remuneration depending on the school type. Three-grade schools disrupt this pattern slightly, which is not surprising given the fact that almost all such establishments were run by female religious congregations and, as we mentioned earlier, nuns earned much lower remuneration than lay teachers. The situation was similar in

preschools, which were mostly operated by religious orders. The largest group of teachers worked in 1-grade schools. Their teachers received nearly 170 thousand reals on average. As far as 2-grade schools go, the mean salary was reduced substantially by the low remuneration paid to nun teachers. If we exclude them from our considerations, the remaining 18 teachers employed in such institutions would enjoy a very high average salary of over 275,000 reals per month. Now, if we disregard nuns working in 4-grade and upper-grade schools, the mean teaching salary would surge to nearly 400 thousand reals, which aligns with the average remuneration paid to Brazilian teachers, who brought home around 250 to 450 reals per month.

Finally, let us examine the income of teachers in respect of Brazilian states as administrative districts. Taking all states into account, the highest salaries were earned by teachers working in three schools located in the states of Espírito Santo and São Paulo, but such cases were very rare. In the states with the largest number of immigrants from Poland, teachers earned the most in Paraná, followed by Rio Grande do Sul and, last but not least, Santa Catarina (Table 5).

Table 5. Mean salary of Polish teachers in 1938, by state.

State	Mean salary	No. of teachers	%
Parana	180,318	187	56.0%
Rio Grande do Sul	157,880	108	32.3%
Santa Catarina	145,639	36	10.8%
Other (Sao Paulo, Espirito Santo)	266,667	3	0.9%
Total	170,100	334	100.0%

If we left out the nun teachers, who did not earn much in schools, it becomes clear that the arithmetical mean for Parana teachers would increase to over 217 thousand reals. The figure

would not change at all in the states São Paulo and Espírito because no schools run by Polish women's congregations were found in those areas. The average would increase in Rio Grande do Sul, but not as much as in Parana – up to 164 thousand reals. In Santa Catarina, the average would be nearly 158 thousand reals.

In summary, the article is a historical and economic analysis of the remuneration of teachers working in Polish schools in Brazil. The source data also come from questionnaires prepared by Poland's Consulate General in Curitiba, covering 336 teachers working in 264 schools. The questionnaires are dated March and April 1938 – the period leading up to the promulgation of so-called nationalization laws by the Getúlio Vargas government.

The greatest influx of immigrants from the Polish territories occurred in the late 19th and the early 20th century, with the largest Polish communities established in three southern Brazilian states: Parana, Rio Grande do Sul, and Santa Catarina. After Poland regained independence in 1918, a consulate was set up in Curitiba, which became the center for diplomatic and organizational activities among Polish diaspora members, including oversight of school education. Polish schools in Brazil were private, they were often operated by school societies, parishes or religious congregations. As per data from 1938, the average remuneration of Polish teachers in Brazil was around 170 thousand reals. Excluding the directors of Sienkiewicz College in Curitiba and Copernicus College in Mallet, Polish teachers in Brazil earned approximately 163 thousand reals. By comparison, in Brazilian public schools, salaries of lower-level teachers ranged from 150 to 250 thousand reals per month, which suggests that Polish teachers had modest earnings but were within the lower brackets of the national average.

The largest group (ca. 31%) earned from 90 to 120 thousand reals, and nearly a quarter of them received 100 thousand reals per month. Polish teachers were not paid for summer vacation,

which increased job insecurity. The salary gap was considerable: one teacher (excluding the headmasters of the aforementioned colleges) earned as much as 620 thousand reals per month, while the lowest recorded salary was only 25 thousand reals.

On average, men earned 199 thousand reals, whereas women teachers were paid 133 thousand reals. The highest-paid group were married teachers (ca. 244,000 reals), while the lowest remuneration was paid to nuns (ca. 114,000 reals), which significantly lowered the average for women teachers.

Our study also found a correlation between remuneration and the type of school. In one- and two-grade schools, teachers received 170–180 thousand reals every month, but in four-grade or larger schools, teachers earned over 219 thousand reals. Preschools run by religious congregations offered the lowest remuneration.

In terms of geographic distribution, teachers from the state of Parana earned the highest salaries (180 thousand reals on average), followed by those from Rio Grande do Sul (158 thousand reals) and Santa Catarina (146 thousand reals). Exceptionally high earnings were noted in a few schools in the states of São Paulo and Espírito Santo, where no religious congregations operated.

In conclusion, we can venture a claim that the majority of Polish teachers working in Brazil lived in rather difficult financial conditions. Their work often had a missionary and social character; it was often performed out of a sense of obligation as Poles. Undoubtedly, many of the educators whose questionnaires are held by the Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw can be considered guardians of the Polish language and culture. Unfortunately, the nationalization policy pursued by President Vargas led to the demolition of Polish education in Brazil. Finally, it is worth noting that the analyses presented here may serve as a starting point for further detailed prosopographic research, but also an inquiry into the economic history of the Polish diaspora in Brazil.

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