

Poles may be familiar with the refugees produced by the November Uprising who remained in Europe, particularly France, but some did come to North America. In 1834, Congress actually awarded land for settlement to 235 such émigrés in Illinois. Illinois at the time had only been a state for 16 years and was somewhat on the American frontier. Those émigrés were supposed to form a “Polish colony,” the assumption being that freedom-loving Poles would be an asset to the republican United States. For various reasons, that project never actually succeeded. Among the factors leading to its failure were squatters on the land who would not give it up for “foreigners,” a proposal to relocate the Poles to Michigan, and the eventual dissolution of the Polish group itself, each making his own accommodations as life went on (pp. 323-29).

Obviously, the Polish presence in the United States prior to the mass immigration of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or even before immigrants showed up at Panna Maria in Texas, was small compared to what it would be. But those limited numbers should not be taken as suggesting that Poles did contribute to the early American Republic or that Americans were not interested in what was going on in Poland itself. This period is acquiring greater scholarly attention, e.g., Ewa Modzelewska-Opara’s study, *Dorobek pisarski i misja kulturalna polskich emigrantów w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki w latach 1831-1842* (Kraków, 2022). It is good to see equal attention in the United States.

*John M. Grondelski*  
*Falls Church, Virginia, USA*  
*e-mail: grondelski@op.pl*

RAYMOND LESNIAK, *Cultivating Justice in the Garden State: My Life in the Colorful World of New Jersey Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022. Pp.195, HB, e-book. ISBN 9781978824973.

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The impact of Polish American politicians on U.S. national politics is relatively limited, particularly in proportion to their population. Polish American politicians have had far greater impact on state and local politics but, because those influences are more localized, their impact tends to be less documented. Polish Americans have, for example, been numerically better represented in state legislatures, the legislative bodies that make laws for individual states. That is a fruitful field for research.

Raymond J. Lesniak (b. 1946) spent 40 years in the New Jersey Legislature, five in the lower chamber (General Assembly), 35 in the State Senate. He also was chairman of the New Jersey State Democratic Party, a significant position in a state dominated by

Democrats and one of only two Polish American (the other being John Wisniewski) to hold that job. Finally, Lesniak was New Jersey campaign manager for the 1996 Clinton-Gore and 2000 Gore-Lieberman Presidential campaigns, as well as for various candidates for governor and other offices in New Jersey. Campaign managers are important, because victorious candidates tend to remember who helped them win, providing them *entrée* to a new administration.

This book is Lesniak's autobiography, starting from his youth through his defeat running for Governor of New Jersey in 2017. Lesniak founded and is currently president of the Lesniak Institute for American Leadership at Kean University in Union, New Jersey, an institute he created to train young people aspiring to enter politics, particularly those who share Lesniak's very liberal positions. There are some rumors that Lesniak may consider running for election to the U.S. Congress in 2024, although he would be 78 at the time.

Lesniak was born, raised, and continues to live in Elizabeth, New Jersey, a city of 137,000 people and the administrative center of Union County. It lies south of Newark and adjacent to Newark Liberty International Airport.

When Lesniak was born in the 1940s, Elizabeth housed a considerable Polish American population. Alongside a waterfront leading to New York Harbor, Elizabeth offered employment to men in the chemical and petroleum industries, while Singer Sewing provided employment to women. Two Polish parishes arose in Elizabeth: St. Adalbert and St. Hedwig. In subsequent years, the demographic make up of Elizabeth has changed, shifting considerably towards immigrants from Latin America.

Lesniak's father was a factory worker. Both parents were U.S.-born children of immigrants. Lesniak writes about growing up in a Polish American home, but that his parents did not teach him Polish, preferring to focus on English in the land in which he would live. He describes his homelife as a blend of Polish and American elements:

[W]e were very much a Polish American household. We attended Polish cultural events in the neighborhood, we danced polkas, and all of our christenings and weddings were Polish affairs. But even then you could see the cultural exchanges. On the tables at family weddings were bottles of Scotch whiskey and American rye [...] and, of course, Polish vodka (pp. 2-3).

Lesniak also learned to play the accordion, performing for several years on weekends with a polka band that played at church dances, weddings, and other occasions. Like many Polish Americans, polka music was an opportunity to earn extra money "on the side," to socialize, and to give expression to someone's ethnic pride and cultural interests. It was not just about imitating "Polish" music because American polka music often embodied fusions of melodies drawn from Europe with contemporary American music, be that big band, jazz, or pop. Men who might spend their workweek in factories found creative release in playing music in bands.

Lesniak attributes his entry into politics to "strong Polish women," his mother and a local realtor active in Union County Democratic politics, Katherine "Ma" Green. His

mother was a committeewoman in Elizabeth, a role that basically involved motivating and organizing people to go out and vote for a party's candidates. New Jersey Polonia in those years was strongly allied to the Democratic Party. It was only the proliferation of liberal social policies, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, that led some New Jersey Polonians into Republican ranks. "Ma" Green, despite the surname, was interested in seeing Polish Americans advance in local politics. She facilitated Lesniak's entry into local Union County politics after he graduated law school, first getting him a job in the administration of then-Democratic Governor Brendan Byrne and finally pushing Lesniak to run for a seat in the New Jersey General Assembly in 1978. Lesniak served in the Assembly five years before seeking election to the upper house, the New Jersey State Senate, where he remained from 1983-2018.

In the book, Lesniak recounts various legislative and political battles he fought over those forty years. As one would expect from a politician writing about his tenure, Lesniak generally frames his positions as correct. The book offers insights into how politics functions in a state largely dominated by one party (Democrats) and with strong traditions of local rule (which empowers many local politicians in their little districts).

In a high-tax state where spending is generous but taxes do not cover the outlays, Lesniak defends various high spending Democratic governors. But his greatest attention is to issues he thought important: environmental protection (preservation of open wetlands and cleanup of toxic properties left behind after the demise of heavy industries in the state's urban areas), betting on sports (which he defends as a way of protecting the horse industry in New Jersey), abolition of the death penalty, and legalization of homosexual "marriage." He also devotes attention to his failed effort to protect James McGreevey, a New Jersey governor who resigned after it became public that he was in a homosexual relationship with an Israeli man (an affair of which his wife supposedly did not know) whom McGreevey appointed to a state body dealing with "homeland security" after 9/11.

Lesniak deserves credit for writing this book and Rutgers University for its publication. While politically I disagree with most of what Lesniak stands for I note that, in terms of the political contributions made by Polish American politicians, much of it is very local and so remains unrecorded. To the degree it *is* documented, it is usually in a purely factual way, i.e., Kowalski did this and that, usually without providing context, historical background, or significance. In this book, we have the proponent of the policies explaining what happened from his point-of-view, an important insight for the historical record.

New Jersey had a large Polish population: some would say up to 1,000,000 people, at least 500,000-600,000. Given that significant demographic proportion, Polish Americans have been underrepresented in Garden State politics. New Jersey has sent only two Polish Americans to Congress in Washington: the indicted Henry Helstoski, who left office in 1977, and the extremely liberal Thomas Malinowski, who served two terms (2018-22) before being defeated for reelection.

Among Polish Americans, Lesniak arguably has checked some of the most important political boxes: four decades as a legislator, head of the dominant political party in the state, manager for multiple campaigns, including two presidential campaigns in a state that is important for Democrats to win. In his book, Lesniak mentions a few other Polish Americans with whom he worked politically, e.g., Robert Janiszewski. At one time Janiszewski, who was Hudson County Executive (the head of a populous county), was considered to be a rising star in New Jersey politics, but involvement in bribery ended his ascent. Lesniak hardly mentions John Wisniewski, an unusual omission given that – apart from Lesniak – he was the only other Polish American to head the New Jersey Democratic Party. The fact that Wisniewski, a fellow legislator, ran against and outpolled Lesniak in the 2017 primary election for Governor, might account for his limited press. Other Polish American politicians who also spent long years in New Jersey government and the Polonia community, e.g., George Otlowski (who was also associated with the Polonian newspaper *Nowy Świat*), are not mentioned at all. That suggests there is considerable space for research and writing in this field, while recognizing that Lesniak has contributed to that work by doing something Polonian politicians have rarely done: written extensively about themselves.

*John M. Grondelski*  
*Falls Church, Virginia, USA*  
*e-mail: grondelski@op.pl*