“Bolujmy więc!”: Polish Americans and Bowling in Milwaukee

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Bowling played a key role in community life among Polish Americans in Milwaukee during the first half of the 20th century. This working-class pastime was uniquely suited to industrial Milwaukee, which long held the reputation as “America’s bowling capital,” and the Polonia of the city accounted for a dominant share of its bowling public, focused for the most part in alleys within taverns on the Polish “South Side.” The locally-based Polish American Bowling Association attempted to unite Polish American bowling nationwide under its leadership. The bowling culture of Polish Milwaukee came to an end by mid-century, linked with larger social phenomena such as suburbanization and ethnic succession in what had been traditional ethnic urban neighborhoods.

Keywords: bowling; Milwaukee; Polish American Bowling Association; Polish Americans; Polonia; taverns

Readers are invited to take a break from weightier matters to consider the historical connections between three things that, to borrow the catchphrase of the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, traditionally “don’t get no respect”: Polish Americans, the city of Milwaukee, and the sport, or pastime, of bowling. All of them are burdened with stereotypes as working class, proletarian, and lowbrow, often looked down upon or mocked by social and cultural elites in the United States. Moreover, each member of this trio has become closely associated with the others in the American imagination, reinforcing and seemingly confirming the downscale image of them all.

This blue-collar interlocking relationship is readily demonstrated in numerous examples drawn from American popular culture. The fondness of the U.S. Polonia for tenpins was a common motif of the demeaning “Polish jokes” whose Stateside

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vogue, thankfully, appears to have passed. In the Coen brothers’ film *The Big Lebowski* (1998), the two main characters, oddball screwups and bowling partners, have Polish surnames. The television series “Laverne and Shirley” (1976–1983) featured two young women, best friends working day jobs on the assembly line of a Milwaukee brewery in the 1950s; after clocking out, the pair might while away leisure hours happily rolling for the company bowling team, or spending time with their buddies, among them the amiable dimwit Lenny Kosnowski.

Stereotypes all, to be sure, and examples taken from fiction, but both stereotypes and fiction can contain solid kernels of truth, and such is the case with these. After all, Milwaukee did gain fame as one of the great manufacturing centers of the United States, and this gritty fact defines its civic identity and reputation to this day; Polish immigrants, and the following generations born on American soil, did largely settle into a niche within their adopted homeland as a population of urban laborers of lesser skills, education, and status, and many of them toiled in the factories of Milwaukee and dwelt in its hardscrabble nearby neighborhoods; bowling did come to be regarded, not inaccurately, as a favorite sport of the working classes; and Milwaukee did earn recognition for several decades as the unquestioned leading hotbed of the game known in Polish as *kręgle*, with Polish American enthusiasts comprising most of its avid local following. For several decades, the Poles of Milwaukee looked to bowling as a source of recreation and fellowship, of bonding within the ethnic community, and—so some of them hoped—a means of winning approving recognition from outsider social betters accustomed to looking down their noses at them. Why did these things happen, and come together, and what can knowing about them tell us about the ways of life of the American *Polonia* during the first half of the 20th century?

The answers begin with the forces that carried first Germans, with their amusements, and later Poles, in large numbers, to an emerging American metropolis on the western shore of Lake Michigan. Games involving rolling balls to knock down wooden pins, anticipating modern tenpin bowling, had deep roots in north central Europe. German immigrants brought this diversion with them to the New World. 

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2 For example: “How do you tell the groom at a Polish wedding?” “He’s the one in the clean bowling shirt.”

and in its period of early development in the United States in the 19th century, before it reached a broader public, bowling would remain strongly identified with the Teutonic newcomers. The German influx concentrated on the upper Midwest, and on Milwaukee above all other destinations. By the turn of the century, over half the local population of nearly 300,000 were native Germans or their offspring. Milwaukee became renowned proverbially as the most German city in America, with Germanic culture dominant. Bowling had first gained notice there a few years earlier as an attraction added to Old World-style beer gardens opened by the breweries that “made Milwaukee famous,” in the well-known phrase of one of their advertisements. The first enclosed bowling parlors in town began to open for business in the last decade of the 19th century.

Most of the early bowling operations in the United States doubled as taverns, a uniquely ubiquitous institution and presence in Milwaukee. Barroom owners began to add bowling to the other games and entertainments, such as billiards or pool, they offered to amuse their clientele, give them reason to linger over another round of drinks, and lure new customers. Typically, these first bowling alleys started as modest additions to taverns, from two to six lanes, installed in an anteroom adjacent to the bar, or downstairs in a basement.

As the new century began, some seventy thousand Poles had settled in Milwaukee, amounting to a quarter of its inhabitants, and second in number only to the Germans. They earned their livelihoods as common laborers in factories, and turned the city’s industrial South Side into a “Little Poland” to rank with any other in the United States. The Milwaukee Polonia was unusual among American Polish diaspora colonies in that they hailed mainly from the zone of partitioned Poland ruled by Germany, an advantage in a foreign setting where the voice of the foreman or boss was likely the German tongue they knew from the old country. It is also reasonable to surmise that the immigrant Poles were acquainted with the Germanic versions of the “pin” games that, like them, had crossed the oceans from afar, and that they might have found them a recognizable and invitingly familiar feature in an otherwise alien environment.

As Poles had, in effect, followed the Germans to Milwaukee, so did they follow them into the bowling parlors of the “Cream City.” Tenpins had no presence or following on the Polish South Side until 1904, when neighborhood residents began
dropping in to taverns cum alleys newly opened for business by German proprietors; sensing an opportunity, Polish barkeeps and entrepreneurs quickly followed suit. The first Polish-owned South Side bowling house made its debut in 1908, and at least six more had appeared by 1920. One of these, the Forest Home Arcade, a six-lane establishment originally built and run by Stanisław (“Stanley”) Schultz, standing in the heart of the neighborhood, across the street from St. Adalbert (Wojciech) Church, would emerge to become, more than any of its competitors, the all but official headquarters of Milwaukee’s Polish bowling culture in its four-decades-long heyday.9

Milwaukee and bowling turned out to be made for each other. This was a workingman’s town, and after quitting time, the factory hands would repair to one of its nearly two thousand taverns for a drink, or two, or more, and maybe roll a few games while they were at it. The corner watering hole remained the natural location for bowling in Milwaukee for years to come.10 The appeal of bowling to the working class clientele of the taprooms is not hard to grasp: it was conveniently found near to home, was inexpensive, could be played indoors in any weather, and combined competition requiring only moderate skill or exertion with camaraderie, plus the added benefit of the customary imbibing of alcohol as accompaniment.11 Other, larger cities could claim more numbers of bowlers, but consistently Milwaukee topped them all in municipal per capita participation. Before long, the Wisconsin city acquired the nickname “America’s bowling capital,” and this fairly won reputation became a durable part of its image.12

By the end of the 1920s, the local Polonia had come to make up the lion’s share of this unmatched Milwaukee bowling public. By one contemporary tally, Poles by birth or ancestry—roughly one-fifth of the city’s population—accounted for an eye-opening 65 percent of its keglers.13 This statistical improbability is largely explained as the result of a sort of multiplier effect of overlapping employment, residential, and leisure patterns. For the most part, Polish American men were blue-collar workers—the core bowling audience—and traditionally sought their after-hours recreation and male fraternization in the many beer-and-bowling taverns that lined the near-to-home main commercial arteries of the South Side, such as Mitchell Street, Lincoln Avenue, and Forest Home Avenue.

In addition to casual, walk-in patronage, the alleys of the South Side and the secondary Polish district to the north, along an industrial stretch of the Milwaukee River,
hosted scores of organized leagues and tournaments that kept the bowling boom going despite the serious challenges posed to the tavern business by Prohibition and the Great Depression. The characteristic entrants in these competitions were teams representing workplaces, clubs, Catholic parishes, or simply groups of friends. The main promoters of such events were the various Polish fraternals, responding to the growing appetite of younger members for American-style sports, and encouraging bowling as an activity beneficial to the health and vitality of their elders. The local branches of the Polish National Alliance, Polish Roman Catholic Union of America, Polish Falcons, and the Milwaukee-based Polish Association of America all sponsored popular tournaments for many years.\(^\text{14}\)

One development that notably enlarged the numbers of Polish American bowlers in the city was the growing entrance of women into what had been an unappealing—indeed, practically forbidden—exclusively masculine preserve, reflecting a general trend in patronage of the sport. Virtually synonymous with the saloon, the bowling parlor had acquired an unsavory reputation as a den of drunken and smoky atmosphere, of gambling and other legally or morally dubious doings, and of coarse male carousing—in short, of men behaving badly. Not only did this environment repel women, many taverns discouraged or outright barred their presence. Recognizing an opportunity to expand their bowling market, not a few proprietors took measures to clean up and brighten their premises, and to set aside times for ladies-only rolling.\(^\text{15}\)

Women took up the invitation with alacrity: when offered in a setting they found comfortable, bowling appealed to them as an occasion for light exercise combined with ample measures of female companionship and conversation. In Milwaukee, many of these women enthusiasts bowled under sponsorship of the P.N.A., usually taking their turns in afternoons, during working hours, with the menfolk reclaiming their hold on the alleys and taverns in the evening.\(^\text{16}\)

With the vogue for the tenpin sport at its peak, a group of Milwaukee Polonia community movers and shakers launched an attempt to assume leadership of Polish American bowling not only in their home city, but throughout the United States. In 1928 the Polish American Bowling Association came into being, announcing its ambition “to unite all qualified persons of Polish Extraction [sic] in a central national bowling organization, to encourage and foster among its members and bowlers the spirit of goodfellowship.”\(^\text{17}\)


\(^{16}\) M. Kaczkowski, Milwaukee’s Historic Bowling Alleys, p. 64.

\(^{17}\) Polish American Bowling Association Articles of Incorporation, January 6, 1928, Polish American Bowling Association records [hereafter PABA], box 1, folder 3, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries Archives.
devotees, PABA was a thoroughly white-collar initiative. Its original board of officers was composed of successful businessmen, lawyers, physicians, figures of political influence—in short, the cream of Milwaukee Polish American society. Their motives, apart from genuine passion for bowling and belief in ethnic solidarity, sprang from their sense of the importance of the pastime to the rhythm of daily life within the Polish neighborhood, and, no doubt, to cement their own high status among local Poles by advancing the well-being of the sport they loved. Although he was never its titular head, the acknowledged creator and guiding spirit of PABA was John A. Schultz, Jr., who had succeeded his founder-father Stanisław as owner of the Forest Home Arcade and would see to it that the new association that was his brainchild would largely operate out of his own South Side alley.18

As the key to its ambition to coalesce the extensive but decentralized world of Polish American bowling in the United States under its guiding hand, PABA established an annual tournament, held in alternating years in Milwaukee and in nearby Chicago, where a secondary base of the organization functioned. Entry in these contests was open to all of Polonia, but strictly only to Polonia, especially targeting “every Polish stronghold within reasonable distance” from the two centers of the organization on Lake Michigan.19 John Schultz took on the role of point man for this project. As longtime secretary of PABA from its inception, he handled most of the details and correspondence having to do with setting up and publicizing the tournaments. Schultz, his alley, and PABA all thrived into the 1940s. He won election as a Milwaukee alderman in 1932 and served in that post for sixteen years; the annual tournaments he coordinated that were the top priority of PABA won considerable popularity; and his Forest Home Arcade maintained its position as one of the favorite gathering places of South Side keglers.20

In its early years of success, energy, and optimism, PABA published a book-length history of Polish bowling in Milwaukee in the ancestral language. While predictably superficial and celebratory, consisting mainly of numbing lists of statistical results from local leagues and tournaments over the course of three decades, here and there its pages turn up useful bits of arcana about the emergence and rapid expansion of the sport on the Polish side of town, and revealing, sometimes quirky glimpses into the sense of spirited communal fun the city Polonia found in bowling. For instance, the macaronic neologisms that rendered English bowling terminology into Americanized Polish: on the South Side, the game they played might not be called

18 Register, John A. Schultz papers, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries Archives; Polish American Bowling Association Articles of Incorporation, January 6, 1928, PABA; T. Borun, ed., We, the Milwaukee Poles, pp. 154–155.
20 Register, John A. Schultz Papers; Register, PABA; M. Kaczkowski, Milwaukee’s Historic Bowling Alleys, p. 70.
kręgle, or kręglarstwo, but bolowanie; “to bowl” might not be grać w kręgle, but bolować; and teams with the highest eweredź (average) score might win a czelęńdź (challenge) match, to the satisfaction of their ruterzy (“rooters,” or fans) who watched the competition.\textsuperscript{21} The volume ended, on a characteristic note of cheerful gusto, with the lyrics to what it called the anthem of Polish bowling in Milwaukee, “Do kręgeliń,” (“To the bowling parlor”), a polka that ended with a rousing call, not to arms, but to friendly battle on the hardwood lanes:\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{quote}
Dalej chłopcy, wszyscy wraz!/
Bolujmy więc, ale prosto, póki mamy czas! \\
So come on, boys, all together now!/
Let's bowl, then, but quickly, while we have time!
\end{quote}

But as it happened, time was running out both for PABA and the Forest Home Arcade, as would become clear over the course of the next two decades. The Association never managed to attract many bowlers from outside the vicinity of Milwaukee and Chicago to its annual tournament, contrary to its original high hopes, and numbers of entries began to falter in the 1940s. This led to bickering and rivalry between the two PABA chapters, with the Milwaukee office accusing the Chica goans of not holding up their end of doing work for the organization, and of holding inferior tournaments when it was their turn to host.\textsuperscript{23} The head of PABA fumed to his right hand man, John Schultz, that the reason for the downturn was that “this dam (sic) tournament seems to be always run backwards.”\textsuperscript{24} Schultz himself, the indispensable man of the Association from its beginnings, received some of the blame for this decline. Scattered through the PABA records, one finds complaints that the secretary was dilatory and inefficient in keeping up with correspondence, or in making tournament arrangements; if true, this might not be surprising, given his workload as business owner and Milwaukee alderman. By 1953, addressing the dismal prospects for the upcoming annual tournament, one PABA director said out loud that the fault lay with its site, the venerable Schultz’s Forest Home Arcade: it was cramped, aging, and outmoded, and fewer and fewer people wanted to bowl there anymore. Bowing to the demands of its Chicago faction, PABA revised its bylaws to permit its tournament to be held elsewhere. The change did not reverse the ebbing fortunes of the feud-ridden Association, or its signature event. John Schultz died in 1956, and his son and inheritor of the family tavern attempted to revive the organization to which his father had devoted much of his life, but to no avail: PABA held its final tournament in 1963 and then faded out of existence.\textsuperscript{25}

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\textsuperscript{22} J.J. Ludka, Jr., Historja kręglarstwa, p. 193.
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\textsuperscript{23} M.J. Kutza to Ted Tryba, January 21, 1943, PABA, box 1, folder 3. Kutza was PABA president at the time.
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\textsuperscript{24} Kutza to Schultz, [1941], PABA, box 1, folder 2.
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\textsuperscript{25} Minutes of PABA meeting, January 14, 1953, PABA; Register, PABA.
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The deterioration and eventual demise of the Polish American Bowling Association and the Forest Home Arcade went hand in hand, and reflected the approaching end of the vibrant bowling culture of the Milwaukee Polonia; but more, and bigger, than that, it had to do with the emerging drastic shifts in American society that would lead to the widespread breakup and transformation of European-origin ethnic urban neighborhoods in the United States, such as the Polish South Side. In short, both bowling and the Poles were starting to move out to the burgeoning suburbs. From its beginnings, tenpins in the United States had been a recreation of city dwellers played on alleys housed in city taverns—and in Milwaukee, played mainly by the descendants of Polish immigrants; but now the taverns were showing their age, their alleys considered outmoded, and their surroundings regarded as rundown and increasingly dangerous. As the Polish Americans rose in education, employment, and income levels, they began leaving the crowded, tatty near South Side for the residential open spaces and green lawns on the other side of the city limits. At the same time, bowling reached record heights of popularity in postwar America, but now in a suburban setting, in new, bigger, brightly lit alleys, with lots of parking, and the modern convenience of automatic mechanized pinsetters. These gleaming establishments tended to present themselves as bowling “centers” cultivating a “family atmosphere”—in other words, having nothing to do with seedy taverns, or the sort of people who frequented them. Further, these antiseptic confines had been scrubbed clean of the long, colorful association of the game with working class ethnicity. The combined exodus of bowling and its Polonia following from the South Side, coupled with the general broadening of the audience of the sport, had the effect of diluting what had been the traditional concentration of Polish Americans among its local public.

One striking aspect of the story of the heyday of bowling among Milwaukeeans whose ancestors would have called the game kręgle is its pronounced insularity. Although keglers of Polish heritage were so numerically predominant in the city, they seem to have kept largely to themselves, and not often to have visited alleys that were not their own. Standard accounts of Milwaukee bowling history mention Polonia only in passing, and their lists of the finest bowlers the city has produced include none of those nominated by a Polish American sportswriter as the best in the annals of the South Side. The Polish American Bowling Association made its tournament open only to entrants who could trace their roots to Poland, and came down hard on teams that tried to sneak non-Polish ringers into the event. Not that


27 E. Adamski, “Milwaukee Poles in Sport”, in T. Borun, We, the Milwaukee Poles, p. 153.

28 For example, in PABA, Schultz to Eugene Mytys, May 18, 1941, box 1, folder 2; Max A. Barczak and Schultz statement, February 25, 1949, box 1, folder 3. Barczak was PABA president at the time.
this sort of recreational isolation was intentional; in fact, PABA expressed the hope that the Polish proficiency in bowling it saw as its mission to promote would win from American society the respect for their ethnic group they had long been denied (of course, the irony is that, as we know, the popular association of Polonia with this sport widely regarded as déclassé would have precisely the opposite effect). Still, this was just a high-minded, ultimately unfulfilled statement of aspiration for upward mobility, while the lived experience of this beery amusement stayed close to home, shared among the friends and neighbors one knew already from the plant, or the parish, or the Polonophone shops on Lincoln Avenue. The world of Polish bowling in the “Cream City” was strongly inward-looking and self-contained within its own community, very much a South Side thing.

But the Polish South Side of yesteryear, where bowling helped to define and shape a way of life, is no more, and neither is Milwaukee “America’s bowling capital” anymore. Of the more than 200 alleys the city boasted before 1950, fewer than 20 remain now. As for the old Forest Home Arcade, the Schultz family sold the property in 1979, and the building now houses a restaurant and hall specializing as a venue for quinceañeras in a part of town now largely Spanish-speaking. Two holdovers from the bygone glory days of Polish American bowling in Milwaukee survive. In the northerly Riverwest sector, in what had been the smaller Polish district, one can still roll at the six-lane Falcon Bowl, which started as Listwan’s Alleys in 1899, and became the home of Polish Falcons Nest 725 in 1945. On the South Side, at the corner of 21st and Lincoln, the Holler House remains open for business, as it has been since 1908 in successive incarnations as Schachta’s Alleys, Mike’s Tap, and Gene and Marcy’s. The Holler House is well known for its two antique basement lanes, still using human pinsetters: as operator of the oldest “certified” alleys in the United States, this unassuming tavern draws bowling pilgrims from near and far, including the occasional sporting, entertainment, or journalistic celebrity, drawn by the nostalgic pull of its preservation of the homely pleasures of earlier generations. Upstairs, the ground floor barroom abounds in a jumble of bric-a-brac recalling its past as a Polish American gathering spot. Marcy Skowronski, the elderly but still spry second-generation owner of the Holler House, gets sought out for interviews often, and in one of them she reflected on some of the changes she has seen in its patronage over the decades:

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29 J.J. Ludka, Jr., Historja kręglarstwa, p. 5.
30 M. Kaczkowski, Milwaukee’s Historic Bowling Alleys, p. 8.
31 T. Borun, We, the Milwaukee Poles, p. 203; M. Kaczkowski, Milwaukee’s Historic Bowling Alleys, p. 114.
32 Meaning, that scores recorded on them are recognized for official competitive purposes by the United States Bowling Congress.
Years ago, we used to have a neighborhood crowd. But see, they're old, half of them died, and then half of them moved out. But I see the kids, you know, and the grandchildren come in. And it’s really nice, you know, the thing is, they’re all over the country, and every time they hit Milwaukee and step in here to see, you know, if the place is still going. A lot of people will walk in here and say, ‘You’re still here?’

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