Poland is a country in Europe situated between Germany and Belarus with a coastline on the Baltic Sea. Poland has a strong cultural heritage associated with Catholicism, long historic periods of resilience under oppression, and interethnic and confessional toleration. Civil society activism and patriotism in Poland made it the first communist bloc country to break free from the Soviet system, initiating the chain reaction that resulted in the end of the Soviet Union. Poland suffered enormous losses in WWII, losing close to 6 million people, about 20% of its population. Much of the Holocaust happened on Polish territory and its memory still reverberates deeply with many Poles.

**RELIGION**

Roman Catholicism is predominant in Poland, with over 87% of the population indicating adherence. Catholic preeminence is due in part to the Nazi extermination of Jews in WWII (who made up a sizable minority) and German Protestant flight from the Soviet army at the end of the war. Poland is Europe’s most Catholic country (with the exception of tiny Malta) with a higher proportion of Catholics than Italy, Spain, or Ireland. Catholicism’s role (especially Pope Saint John Paul II) in ending communism in Poland is highly respected in Polish culture. John Paul II was Polish and upon his election to the papacy interrupted a 450 year trend of Italian popes.

**ETHNICITY**

Ethnically, Poland is very homogenous, with over 93% ethnic Polish population in 2011. Poland has not seen the same immigration rates that other major European nations, like France and Germany have in the past two decades. This is partially due to lack of former colonial holdings, however it may be changing as global mobility increases. On the flip side, Poles throughout history have immigrated throughout the world with major ethnic enclaves in the United States, Brazil, Israel, Russia, Germany, and elsewhere. Polish ethnicity, as is the case with most ethnicities, is strongly tied to religious identity.

**FAMILY, RELATIONSHIPS & CUSTOMS**

Much of Polish custom and family life is determined by religious identity. Church holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Lent, Corpus Christi, and Pentecost are all celebrated widely in Polish culture. Easter Monday is a national holiday. Poland celebrates Constitution Day on May 3rd in honor of the Polish Constitution of 1791, which was drafted under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and was the first constitution of its kind in Europe. Polish Independence Day also happens to be Armistice Day and US Veterans Day, Nov. 11. The Poles celebrate the end of WWII as the moment of Polish independence.
CONTEMPORARY POLAND

Poland has seen a marked shift in national trajectory over the last 25 years since the collapse of Soviet and Russian influence in the 1980s. Lech Walesa’s Solidarity movement culminated in radical political and economic reform in the final decade of the 20th century that saw Poland shifting into the European Union (in 2004), NATO, and the broader economic community of the West. Poland was the economic success story of the early post-communist period and many other post-communist states modeled their transitions away from command economies after the “Polish model”, mostly to poor results. Today, the Polish economy is strong and dependent primarily on machine manufacturing, electronics, and furniture exports.

Exemplifying political trends similar to other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Hungary, Poland has seen a shift to the right with the victory of the Law and Justice Party in 2015. This party supports a strong state and tends to be socially conservative, hostile to immigration, and leery of the EU. Poland continues to wrestle with its communist heritage and its position as a strong economy in between Europe’s two strongest economies, Germany and Russia. Recent attempts to develop shale gas extraction in Poland have been suspended.

POLES IN THE USA

The United States is host to the largest Polish diaspora community in the world, with more than 10 million ethnic Poles. American born Poles predominate with only 4% of the group being foreign born. The largest concentration of American Poles can be found in Chicago, which received the majority of the first wave of Polish immigration between 1870-1924. Chicago celebrates a regional Polish holiday, Casimir Pulaski Day, in honor of the Polish American general in the Revolutionary war. Polish predominance in blue collar industries at the turn of the century has been transitioning across generations, so that Polish Americans are well assimilated into American society with representation in all economic strata. Many of the American Poles are also Jewish.

USEFUL LINKS

http://www.theguardian.com/world/poland

NAMES

First names in Poland are called imię and last names nazwisko. It is required by law that names indicate gender and most female names end in -a and most male names end with consonants. Popular Polish names include: Wojciech, Lech, Władysław, and Mieszko. Popular female names include: Julia, Maja, Lena Wiktoria, and of course, Maria.

FAMOUS POLES

Many notable people of Polish descent have contributed to all areas of American society and the world. Frank Gehry, Charles Bukowski, Roman Polanski, Gore Verbinski, Billy Wilder, Christopher Hitchens, Larry King, Gloria Steinem, Pat Benatar, Liberace, Jack White, Jon Stewart, Alan Greenspan, Pope John Paul II, Michael Bloomberg, Chuck Hagel, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Tim Pawlenty, and Ted Kaczynski are all examples of famous Poles. Famous Poles of history include: Copernicus, Chopin, Marie Curie, and Joseph Conrad.

POLISH WORDS

Cheers!.................................Na Zdrowie!
How are you?....................Jak się masz?
Good………………………………..
Hi / Bye……………………………...
Hello / Welcome…………………
Good Day…………………….
Goodbye……………………..
Yes……………………………………...
No……………………………………….