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Informants: Holy Family Church' Polish Language Class
Mary Ziolkowski Home
1001 11th Avenue West, Ashland

Janet and I had been invited to the Polish class' Christmas celebration and so we arrived at 6:00 bearing some Rose wine. A half dozen people were there and we entered Mary's living room to talk with Mary Stelmach, Bernice Barnak, and another woman named Martha. The trio regaled us with stories about growing up on the east side. Older kids from the west side used to torment them as "Polacks" and to avoid mistreatment on the way home, some of them used to dash across the railroad trestle - to the horror of their mothers who feared a train would come. Bernice and Mary, two well dressed and animated ladies in their mid-70's, recalled that they spoke no English when they began school at Holy Family. As a result they had a tough time asking to use the "washroom." As we talked, Alex Siedlecki entered with his sister Ann and Pete Syminski (sp.?). Joining the conversation, Alex reeled off a string of Polish friends who altered their names (usually by shortening them) in high school. Since his name was Alexei Siedlecki (pronounced, at least by Alex, "Shitlesski"), Alex reckoned abbreviating his name would be unwise.

Bit by bit others began to arrive and arrange themselves around several tables bunched in Mary's level room to make a long banquet table (see the diagram). Notably, Pete and Alex gathered at the far end of the room, the "Men's End," where they wouldn't be able to get up and would have to be served. A white plastic table cloth covered the tables and in the middle were Polish and American flags. The plates and coffee cups were transparent glass and the middles of the plates were engraved with the Ziolkowski Polish coat of arms. Various dishes contained pickled beets, herring, and mixed nuts.

At roughly 6:40, when all had arrived, Mary Ziolkowski read from a book of Polish recipes. She and the others had planned the meal to resemble a Polish Christmas Eve feast. According to the text Mary quoted, the meal was to be meatless (since Advent was still a time of abstinence), yet it was to be festive as well. Accordingly, the first item to be consumed was a wonderful concoction of Vodka, honey, lemon wedges, cinnamon sticks, and nutmeg (). After a recitation of the "Our Father" in Polish, everyone toasted with this stuff. Then "the men" (Alex and Pete) called for boilermakers since the Vodka mixture was "too sweet." Brandy and beer were brought to them and, egged on, I joined them in the

same. Martha ? brought the drinks and made several sly remarks to Alex who, as he confessed to me, had been sweet on her since her teens.

Following the toast, we all turned our attention to a wafer on the glass plate. Termed *oplatki*, this wafer was of the same substance as the Catholic communion host. Apparently it has been the custom in Polish and Polish-American homes for everyone to break off and eat a piece of each other's wafer and wish them holiday felicities. Ceil McDonald, at my right elbow, told me that her father used to preside over this ritual while she was growing up on the east side.

Next, we were served some hot round popovers, followed by small bowls of bortsch. Unlike Russian bortsch, this soup had no cabbage but slivers of beets and parts of that vegetable's stems and leaves. Ceil, Mary Stelmach, Bernice Barnak, and Rose Lajcak entered upon an animated discussion of how to fix the soup; more specifically, they talked about how and when to add the cream so that it wouldn't curdle. After the soup came the main course (along with wine, beer, and brandy). It consisted of breaded filets of Lake Trout magnificently prepared by Alex, Martha ? 's, "gracsz kupusto" (or sauerkraut with split peas), and pierogis filled with prune or cottage cheese.

Dessert, along with coffee, consisted of Rose Lajcak's wondrous pastries: a rolled poppy seed bread and small pastries with prune, apricot, and poppy seed fillings. There was also a traditional fruit compote consisting of prunes and apricots.

Conversation was spirited throughout the meal. Bernice and Mary talked about their recent trips to Poland, and their family origins in Russian and Austrian parts of Poland. Julia Geik (sp.?) took these mentions as an opportunity to point out that "Russian and Austrian parts of Poland" were really Poland despite foreign domination. Julia is a sharp tongued and quick witted woman who is also a staunch nationalist. Apparently, she is fond of holding forth on patriotic matters and Ceil McDonald, at my left elbow, jostled me every time Julia spoke. Ceil made several jokes about the amount of liquor people were consuming and she pretended offense at the fact that a few others had larger glasses. As usual, Pete recounted to Janet his days in the Polish army, while he and Alex, spurred by their boiler-makers, indulged in witty comments to the ladies. There was plenty of Polish sprinkled amidst the English. Alex made a big deal of giving the proper Polish term for the fish he'd prepared (no one else knew the word). Ceil helped me with translations when bursts of Polish got heavy.

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After dinner, dishes were cleared away and talk continued. As Pete and Alex began singing parodies of the Polish National Anthem and a drinking song, I fetched the tape recorder and set it up on the couch behind me, while placing the microphones in front of me on the table. With this arrangement, I could pick up conversation on both ends of the table. I could also reach behind me and turn the machine on or off without much trouble. As the tape shows, there were plenty of conversations going on at once and the singing was intermittent at best. Occasionally, I attempted to focus the talk by asking questions about Pufall's Hall, old time weddings, and local musicians. But, not wishing to make the contest too formal or myself too obnoxious, I didn't press any questions.

After a bit Mary Ziolkowski organized the bunch into singing Christmas and patriotic songs around the table. Bruno Synkula had brought along his Hohner button accordion and, seated on a couch behind his chair, he punched out accompaniment. Occasionally, he wasn't familiar with a tune. Mary Stelmach and Bernice Bernak then sang the melody and Bruno followed quickly with the proper notes. Mary and Bernice were enthusiastic singers and are presently members of Holy Family's choir. Both sing in high, clear voices. Alex and Pete's booming vocals were also prominent. Although the group was singing from printed sheets, they sometimes (as I'd noticed on my first visit) sang without the sheets or added verses which didn't appear in print.

Following the formal Christmas singing, as some began to leave, Bruno continued to play. He offered some old Polish dance pieces and house party songs with considerable drive and dexterity. Mary and Bernice and "the men" chimed in when they knew the words. Alex and Pete also boomed out snatches of some "dirty" songs (at least I think they did, as some reminded the pair that my tape recorder was on). Beyond Polish numbers, Mary and Bernice lead some old favorites learned in school or from popular sources: "Old Black Joe," "You Are My Sunshine," etc.

Shortly after ten the party ended. As people were trickling out I made arrangements to tape, in separate sessions, Bernice and Mary, Pete and Alex, and accordionist Bruno Synkula's playing. Janet and I were the last to leave. We learned, unfortunately, that the group may not be singing at the 10 o'clock Mass on Christmas Day because of a conflict with the main choir. There is still a chance that the singing will be done at the eight o'clock Mass. I'll have to call Mary Z. for details. Tendering our thanks for a delightful evening, we said goodbye.