

SLOVENIAN BUTTON ACCORDION PROJECT

Tape Notes  
4/11/84  
jwb

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INTERVIEW WITH: Jim Karish

AT: Karish Home  
504 4th Street No.  
Biwabik, MN 55708  
218/865/6904

Tapes: Reels SBB 01,02,03  
cassette CSBB 1,2  
Slides: Sheet 1: 1-11

DATE: Wednesday, April 11, 1984

This was the first interview of the project and was conducted in the basement rec room of the Karish home. Jim was excited about being interviewed, and was aware that I was just beginning the project. Wednesday, April 11, 1984, 7:00 p.m. Conversation focused on Jim and how he learned how to play, his family and neighbors, other biographic data.

Jim Karish was born in Biwabik on March 15, 1940. His parents were born, raised, and are still living in Biwabik. His mother is Finnish and her parents came from Finland and/or Sweden. Jim's father is Slovenian; his grandfather born in Austria and his grandmother born in Austria or Yugoslavia. The European borders had changed so there is some question regarding his nationality background. He calls himself "half-breed"--one-half Finn and one-half Slovenian. His grandparents are all immigrants, coming to this country in the late 1800's.

There is music in Jim's family. As a child he remembers his mother's father playing the harmonica. He was blind in his later years. His mother told about his grandfather having a button box but Jim never heard him play.

On his father's side, his dad would play--would "monkey" with it. He played "kuditna", not a song, just playing the basses. Jim doesn't know what the term means--perhaps it's a nonsense word.

Jim played the button box to illustrate the simple bass accompaniment. JB asked him, "What do you call the accordion you play?" He called it a button box. The real name for it in Yugoslavia is Harmonika.

Jim<sup>has</sup> had a Zelesnick button accordion for two years. He also has a Lubas which he bought in 1964 when he was in the army, stationed in Cleveland and living with his aunt. (No base there). He looked for a button box while he was there and his aunt knew of a place called the White Horse Tavern where there were three for sale. He was making \$90.00 a month in the army and he wasn't sure if he should buy it but his aunt said, "Take it. Take it." That's when he first began to play in earnest.

*Grandfather, Uncle +  
Father played*



Prior to this time he had heard button accordion music. In his father's family, his uncle John was a 'tremendous player'. He would travel to Ely and other towns to play. In 1958, his uncle was living in Pennsylvania, Jim went to visit him and played his uncle's old La Tosca piano accordion. His uncle no longer played, so he gave the accordion to Jim. "He must have played in his younger days."

Jim talked about playing the piano accordion and the enjoyment of accordion music. He talked about his neighbor, Louie Sherek, playing the button accordion, and about Bob Pushcar. He remembers the sound of the button box.

The family had a piano (but no automobile) and Jim took lessons. When he expressed interest in the accordion, his folks arranged for him to take lessons at Beddows Music Store in Virginia, 20 miles away. Jim would "bum" or hitchhike. By age 14 he had formed a group with his brother on drums, Joe Platner on banjo and another friend on 'Gut Bucket'. They played for fun, 4th of July, picnics, etc.

Jim always liked the button accordion. He talked about Johnny Pecon as an inspiration. He wrote to him and sent him a deer antler and received an autographed picture in return.

Jim's family would travel to Cleveland to visit relatives. It was there that he heard Pecon and Trebar play button boxes. "They could really 'shpeela'. We call it 'shpeela' in Slovenian, that means, 'Giver 'er all you got!' And they really do it. If that didn't put a tingle up your spine, nothing would. To me, Cleveland means music. You go to Cleveland, you look for a button box player or accordion player, you just listen to them."

Jim talked about players in Biwabik and Louie Sherek and the joy of playing. He plays at Ed and Lucy's Tavern in Biwabik from 7:00 to 10:00 in the evening every Saturday. He also mentioned practicing and playing on Saturday. He played for awhile with the Poderzay brothers calling themselves 'Kar-Pods'--three button boxes and Jim's brother on drums. He talked about playing in nursing homes and his emotions, relating to the patients. Jim has played for the American Yugoslav Youth Dance Group and for family events.

Jim Karish has been married for sixteen years. He has four children, three girls and one boy--Kimberly 15, a son 14 and two daughters, 12 and 10. All four were in the dance group. His youngest daughter has a leg brace. Jim talked about the dance group.

Jim's children are interested in music and he wants them to learn to play the piano accordion first. However, he doesn't want to force them to play. Jim enjoys sharing music with his children and hopes he can encourage their interest in it.



Jim talked about the "beginning" when his father bought him an accordion and his family had no car. He recalls his childhood-- his sister played the piano and his brother played the drums. His father plays the harmonica. His parents owned a clothing store and his father worked for the Erie Mining Co. They still live only a block away. Every Saturday they go to Ed and Lucy's Bar to listen to Jim play.

Jim is a buyer for the Erie Mining Co. He purchases hardware, nuts, bolts, cable, parts, etc. He has been doing this for eighteen years.

In 1964 Jim purchased a used Lubas for \$150.00. He stated that the keys of C, F and B<sup>b</sup> were popular keys. (He talked about Mervar, warning of possible inaccuracy in this account, and mentioned that Lubas worked for Mervar.) Jim has had new bellows put on the Lubas, has had it tuned, and has had a microphone (pick up) installed. The tuning was done with an electronic tuner and the reeds were adjusted. Two people do this work--John Bolster in Minneapolis and Ed Petrovic in Eveleth.

Jim played part of "Moja Dekla", "Without heart or soul or anything."

**JB:** "What is the significance of 'Moja Dekla'?"

**JK:** "It's like singing the National Anthem." "Bohunk", a term for Slovenian, Croation. In Cleveland, the term is not used. "Moja Dekla" is the song I always start with."

"Moja Dekla"

(Jim talked about playing with and without personal expression and feeling. He plays 'straight'. He played 'Moja Dekla' once through ~~to~~ illustrate)

The Lubas has two reeds per note. The Zelesnick has three. This makes a noticeable difference in sound. Regarding three row versus four rows, Jim says one can get more out of a four row if you learn on a three row--utilize all four rows. With a three row, the center row is important. Switching to four row gives you two center rows. In starting on a four row, you probably use two center rows and you do not utilize the two outside rows fully. When asked what kind of box to buy, Jim recommends learning on a three row, then moving to a four row.

"Gramma Na Stajasko"

(Jim plays introduction and sings lyrics then breaks into polka beat.)  
(Check sound on master for vocals.)

Jim talked about losing the language. He learned the words from other players and singers but doesn't know what it means.

"Trzinka" - Polka

Jim talked about the Lubas, how he hasn't played it for awhile. It was probably built in the 20's and is a good instrument. It has a lot of volume for a two reed box.

Jim switched to a Zelesnick and chose different keys for it--F, Bb, Eb and Ab. The Zelesnick has three reeds, three air holes and uses more air. The difference in playing this instrument is that he doesn't have to pull as hard.

He plays a refrain.

Jim talked about the Zelesnick, Melodija and Rothe Button Boxes. He chose the Zelesnick because his friend had a Rothe but the keys stuck. He has had the instrument for two years and it cost \$1,000.00. He talked about breaking the accordion in. "The more you play them, the better they sound."

\*"Kovak's Polka" - his favorite song (bass solo notes)

Jim first heard "Kovak's Polka" in Cleveland and also on a record, then "One day it just came to me." It is played in three different keys.

JB: "Where do you learn songs?"

JK: "It just has to come to you. It's gotta be there." Some songs he heard when he was young. Some from records. Louie Sherek was an influence. Waltzes and polkas are the majority of his repertoire, also some jitterbug, i.e. Five Foot Two. He is working on learning songs to please the folks at Ed and Lucy's.

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Jim talked about a request for the 'Happy Wanderer' for someone's father. He didn't know it but promised to learn it and work on it. The next week he played it and the fellow came up to thank him. Jim has special tunes for certain people in the audience.



SONGS

\*Blackie Sherek-s Waltz"

(Jim talked about Louie and Blackie Sherek)

Waltz

(Same as Louie Sherek's solo waltz?)

\*Waltz - "Another one that Louie taught me." (Jim talked about one song leading to another.)

\*"Zager's Polka" - Jame Zager

"Kulkurin Valssi" - Finnish Waltz

Jim talked about Ed Gersich as an inspiration. This next waltz was written by Ed's father.

\*"Whistler's Waltz" - Ed Gersich, Sr.

Jim mentions Frankie Yankovic. The next waltz is from his playing

"That Night in May"

(Talks over ending)

blend into next tune

"Over Three Hills"

(Talks about changing key "Advantage of four row".)

Jim talks about the next song - short version

"Spanish Eyes"

(Enjoys playing)

Jim talks about playing medleys, how long he plays a song, how he was having trouble learning a song, how someone came up and showed him where the notes were.

Polka medley: Polka Chimes,  
( ),  
Tip Polka, Blueberry  
Polka, ( ),  
( ).

End of taping

(tape warbles out as 3rd  
reel ends.)

After the session, Jim brought out a bottle of Slivovitz that was made by a neighbor. I packed up the equipment and we toasted the button box. The visit lasted until 10:30 p.m.