

Contact: Felix Milanowski
Address: Ashland, Wisconsin
Ethnic Group: Polish
Fieldworkers: Matthew Gallmann
Jim Leary

Date: Thurs. February 5, 1979

At about 3:00 Jim Leary and I went downtown to buy some batteries for his camera and then we headed to 615 Front Street to meet Felix Milanowski. Felix is a Polish man who plays a button accordian. He called Marina in reply to a newspaper article in the Daily Press pertaining to the project.

When we arrived at the house I rang the front doorbell and he motioned for me to enter the house through the side door. I walked in and he greeted me. He asked me to sweep the snow off of my feet with a straw broom and both Jim and I did so.

Felix is about 5'6", husky with a bit of a belly. He's bald and has bright blue eyes. He has a very strong outgoing personality. I found his house to be immaculate. The furniture is new looking and well taken care of.

Felix said that he expected Marina Herman and another woman to be coming. Jim said, "Oh, were you hoping to see some young pretty girls?" And Felix replied negatively. "No, no," he said. "I just got the impression that two women were coming. But just the same."

Felix sat us down at the kitchen table and told us that we were going to see something we'd "never see again." He gave us a slide show. The first slides were of a pulpwood operation that stopped functioning about four years ago. The logs were shipped to Ashland from Canada and Minnesota. Then they would be loaded onto the train. Felix made me read an explanatory sign which he had snapped a picture of when the pulpdock was still operating.

Then there were some slides of an old hotel that stood where the Union National Bank now stands at the corner of Ellis Avenue and Second Street.

Felix seemed to have had a program planned out for Jim and I. After his little slide show was over he got out his accordian. The accordian is a 54 year old German Hohner button accordian. He said his great aunt gave him the accordian. Later we asked him how he learned and he said mainly by ear. "I'm not a musician," said Felix, "I just play by ear." ~~(typical)~~. He gave names of about four or five different people that played accordian in Ashland when he was a boy.

His repertoire consisted of many hymns of the Polish Catholic tradition, Catholic hymns in general, Christmas Carols and dance tunes and the Polish national anthem.

He related a story to us about playing for a "big shot" party when he was a boy. His father worked at the oredocks and had a boss that was in charge of making sure all the loads were complete or weighed in. I'm not sure. This boss was having a party and wanted some live music. He heard the Milanowski's kid could play the accordian. Well, the boss asked Felix's father if his kid could play for this party. Felix's father replied by saying, "I don't know if he's good enough for this type of thing but I'll ask him." The boss said that it didn't matter as long as they had a little entertainment.

So, Felix said that he'd play for this party. His father brought him to the house in the early evening and explained that nobody would be there until midnight. Felix left his accordian at the house and went to the show to "kill a few hours".

Finally at about 12:30 the party started. Felix referred to the people as "big shots". I guess they were mining company executives. He exclaimed that they were nice and enjoyed dancing to the accordian.

Then, he said, the booze came out. It was during prohibition so Felix called the booze "home brew" and "moonshine". (He claimed that they colored some of it at times with brown sugar or charcoal). They were feeding Felix drinks and he said it was good stuff. He was about "14, 15 or 16 at the time."

"Then the food came out and I never seen a table so saturated with food." This party went on until 6:00 in the morning. He claims that this all took place on Ellis Avenue or thereabouts.

Felix also told us about dances they used to have. There was a horse stable that they would clean out and have dances in. A horse driven sleigh would pick people up in town and they'd all drive out to the party. People would bring their own food and booze. When I asked him what kinds of dances they did he said that people would "jig around", polka, schottische and waltz. These parties would last until 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. He said that often times they would party until 4:00, take the sleigh back into town and then attend the 5:15 mass on Sunday morning. Obviously then the dances were often held on Saturday nights.

Felix hasn't been playing his accordian for years until he picked it up just recently. Last Christmas he played at his church. He said he played fifteen minutes of hymns and carols while the people walked in the church.

He said that now his wife will watch t.v. and he'll go upstairs and practice his accordian. "I'll get to playing and play for an hour sometimes."

After he played tunes for us for about forty-five minutes Jim tried to take his picture but the camera wouldn't work. We were sitting in the living room while he played. We went into the kitchen and he offered us a beer. He had two beers ready as well as two chilled glasses and some cheese and crackers. When we asked whether he was going to have a beer himself he said that he didn't drink beer anymore but would have a soda.

Felix gave me three names of "old timers" that can sing many old Polish songs. He was thinking of getting a small choir together and recording some of these songs. Felix is a preservationist. He is a folk item and at the same time a folklorist. He kept stressing the point that if we don't record this material it will be lost. ~~_____~~

I think I should give him a list of the kinds of things I'm looking for.

He's willing to practice songs he used to play. He seems more into the ~~secular~~^{sacred} music at present.

He is very willing to record material for us.