

ETHNIC HERITAGE  
SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER  
NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

Collector: Jim Leary

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Informants: Pete Suminski and Alex Siedlecki  
Ashland, Wisconsin

Pete (84) and Alex (72) are participants in the Polish Conversation Class held weekly at Mary Ziolkowski's home. During those gatherings, they characteristically sat together at one end of the room and delighted in teasing the women. On occasion, too, they sang snatches of Polish songs which were neither sacred nor patriotic. I figured, once off by themselves, they might sing more. Accordingly, I called Alex to arrange a meeting. Both he and Pete lived with in-laws, so we decided to get together in the Burt Conference Room of Northland's Library.

I picked up Alex at his apartment complex in the 900 block of Second Street (the WATW building). He was bundled up and waiting in the lobby. I then stopped to pick up a six pack of beer at Star Liquor and we headed for Pete's. Alex asked me about what was expected of them and I explained the project. He then offered an anecdote from the thirties (I think) when he was sailing on the ore boats. He had stopped in Buffalo, New York and asked in a tavern where the Polish section might be found. Once told, he took a cab to the area and found a tavern. When he addressed the barkeep in Polish, the man responded by "giving me a big plate of food." Soon, "drinks were comin' faster than I could swallow 'em. I didn't even know who was buying them. I tell you, I was lucky to get back to the ship that night." Alex went on to expound on Polish hospitality and how Polish people are always likely to offer you food and a shot of booze. I agreed and told a few similar stories from my experience in Stevens Point.

By this time, we had arrived at Pete's. He lived, with his daughter and son-in-law, in a big frame house shingled with that brown ersatz brick material. The house was in the old Polish section on east 11th, half a block north of St. Claire Street. Like Alex, Pete was dressed and waiting by the door. He hobbled out to the car (both Pete and Alex rely on canes) and we arrived at Northland a few moments later.

As I set up the equipment in the library conference room, I told the pair that we might begin the interview with brief life histories of each before getting down to the business of songs and singing. We all opened beers and Alex began. As the tape index will show, each told about his life in some detail. With specific regard to music, the pair had quite a bit to say about house parties, local taverns, weddings, singing at wakes, and dance tunes.

Getting them to sing was another matter. The library basement, with its yellow cinder block walls and padded purple chairs, seemed to discourage against rowdy song. And despite the intake of a couple of beers, none of us were wildly jolly. Trapped within such somber surroundings, Pete sang with, I think, a fair amount of reluctance and self-consciousness. Apparently, like Alex, Pete knows parts (and not all) of plenty of Polish songs. During parties certain events remind him of songs and then he'll sing out snatches. But without the right goings on to remind and inspire him, Pete had trouble summoning up verses from his memory. The same problem applied to Alex.

Fortunately, Pete had brought along a songbook, from which he sang a pair of songs. The first, concerning the flirtations of a boy and girl ("Nie Bede Sie Zemil Krakowiak"), had a half dozen or so verses and a recurrent chorus. Pete sang quite loudly and put a lot of body motion into his song. He would lean forward slightly and sway from left to right in time with the song's rhythm. Sometimes he waved his cane as well. Alex got a big boot out of this song, laughing here and there, and joining in once in a while on a chorus.

Pete also sang what seemed to be a children's song: "Kazcka Pstra" (p. 49). It concerned a duck and then a goose and featured onomatopoeic animal noises. The songbook was Najnowszy Spiewnik, No. 4 (Philadelphia: I. Podgorski, 1943). Price 50¢, 80 pp. Text, no tunes.

Pete sang one more song which he had written out by hand on a sheet of paper. The song concerned a man who was leaving his sweetheart for the priesthood: "Pielgrzemiej Szacie." It was a "long one" of some twelve verses and Pete's mother used to sing it by heart.

By this time it was 3:30 and, since the library would soon close, we packed up and departed. Maybe one of these days I can capture some of the singing of these men in a more nearly natural context. But it'll be difficult.