
Chapter 20

The Polish Fiddlers of Posen

Program 20 Performances

1. Cedar Swamp Boys, "Hupaj siupaj." 2. Jake Strzelecki, "Leaves Falling Down." 3. Felix Kania, "Wedding March." 4. Ed Kania, "Wedding March." 5. Joe Strzelecki, "Wedding March." 6. Tony Strzelecki and Tony Woczynski, "The Lice That Ate the Pants." 7. Tony Strzelecki and Tony Woczynski, "Turkey in the Straw." 8. Romel Brothers, "Factory Song." 9. Starlites, "Iron Foundry Polka." 10. Art Kole and Walter Bartolmiej, Unnamed tune. 11. Skowiak Brothers, "Oberek."

The Delight of Ethnologists

In the early 1870s, Poles from Poznan and Kashubia were lured by lumber companies to Presque Isle County, Michigan. There they cleared the rocks, stumps, and slashings from cutover acreage and established farms to grow rye and potatoes. They worked winters in the woods and labored in the limestone quarry on the nearby shores of Lake Huron. Some of their near neighbors were Anglo-Americans, but more were Low Germans—the Prussians and Pomeranians with whom they had rubbed shoulders in Europe.

Their relative isolation, rural occupations, and general conservatism combined with a regular influx of fellow immigrants escaping from Pennsylvania coal mines or Chicago factories to help them maintain many features of old-world culture well into the twentieth century. Konrad Bercovici, an immigrant journalist, visited Posen in the early 1920s. The United States had recently restricted immigration, the Prohibition legislation enacted by pious Wasps was in place, the Ku Klux Klan and other touts of "one hundred percent Americanism" were gaining influence. There was considerable public debate concerning the value of "foreigners" within the American fold. Bercovici stressed the intrinsic worth of old-world customs, while championing the immigrant contribution to American life, observing:

The Pole is a very good farmer and a very good cattleman, but he believes in doing things as his father and grandfather did them. He, too, believes in small farm villages instead of a baronial estate for each farmer, as was [Thomas] Jefferson's original dream.

(Bercovici 1925:124)

A decade later, the Federal Writer's Project workers who produced *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State* (1941:484) emphasized only the archaism of a community which had preserved "intact its Polish culture" and therefore "was the delight of ethnologists." They were particularly struck by the vigorous celebration of life cycle rituals—especially weddings.

Dinner for the wedding is provided by the father of the bride; the father of the groom supplies the musicians. Each male guest contributes to the bride's dowry in the ceremony of 'breaking the plate': a china plate is placed on a table in the middle of the room where general dancing is in progress.

(ibid.)

At a specified time, the men threw silver dollars against the plate. When a plate was broken, the bride danced with the thrower—and kept the money. Marriage festivities continued "three days and three nights."

The chroniclers unaccountably ignored the essential participation of women, who prepared substantial traditional meals and, through a cycle of mournful songs, admonished the bride about the toil and anguish of married life. Their terse references to sustained dancing, meanwhile, only hinted at the contributions of a tireless corps of musicians with rich repertoires who kept revelers active for days. Posen's Polish musicians begin turning up in the printed historical record shortly after 1900, although they had been active from the first days of settlement.

From roughly 1908 until the early 1930s, Philip Lewandowski played violin

along with Cash Lewandowski who also played the violin and Walter Pilarski, who was the drummer. This trio traveled to Rogers City, Metz, and Hawks and around the county, usually by the familiar horse and buggy, to play for the famous two-day weddings. (*Posen Centennial* 1970:98)

Felix Kania and Anthony Strzelecki were slightly younger than Lewandowski. Both men were born in Poland in the 1880s and both established farms in Posen, Michigan, in the early twentieth century. Felix Kania, a clarinetist, typically teamed up with a pair of violinists and a drummer to play for local weddings. Anthony Strzelecki, who had learned fiddling by ear from his father, Jacob, often teamed with a brother, Walter, who bowed chords on the bass fiddle (Kania 1989 I; Strzelecki 1989 I).

Up until the 1950s such men regularly escorted Posen wedding parties to and from the church with stately marches. And amidst the wedding dance—held in an empty barn or on a tent-covered outdoor platform—they favored crowds with polkas, waltzes, and such forms as the *oberek*, the *krakowiak*, and the *kujawiak*. But the supposedly "intact" culture that was "the delight of ethnologists" had been slowly evolving since the 1870s. These musicians, like their fathers, also played "Herr Schmidt" (a specialty dance of their German neighbors), a handful of American pop tunes, and an even larger share of square dance melodies acquired from the region's Anglo-Celtic settlers: "Devil's Dream," "The Irish Washerwoman," "Turkey in the Straw," and "Weevily Wheat."

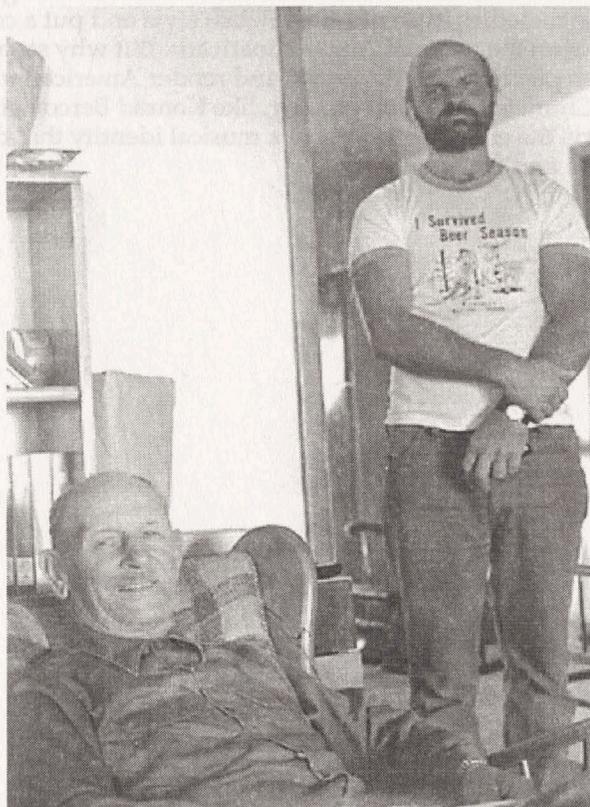
Polish Ballads and Fiddle Tunes

Folklorist Alan Lomax, who visited Posen in 1938 while on a recording trip for the Archive of American Folksong in the Library of Congress, had doubtless been intrigued by the work of the Federal Writer's Project a few years prior, but he was perceptive enough to recognize cultural change. When Lomax recorded the wedding bands of Felix Kania and Anthony Strzelecki, he was most fascinated by the mixture of old-world and new-world sounds.

A visit to Posen, Michigan, brought the Library an interesting collection of Polish ballads and fiddle tunes. Many of the latter had been learned from



Felix Kania, clarinet, leading a wedding band, Posen, Mich., 1920
Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection



Sylvester Romel and his son, Bill, Posen, Mich., 1989 **Photo: Jim Leary**

local [i.e., Anglo-Celtic] fiddlers when the Polish settlers arrived and now among young people are passed under Polish names as Polish tunes.
(Hickerson 1982:79)

In other words, although Lomax found thoroughgoing Polish songs and tunes, he also heard fiddlers bow square dance pieces in a syncopated improvisatory musical dialect that wed the *wiejska* or village orchestras of rural Poland to the string band tradition of British America.

In the late 1980s Ed Kania, Jake Strzelecki, and Joe Strzelecki, the sons of Felix Kania and Anthony Strzelecki, still maintained their community's fancy for both old-country couple dances and new-world hoedowns. Their amalgamated Polish-American repertoire has many parallels throughout the Upper Midwest. In the Weyerhaeuser area of Rusk County, Wisconsin, such small Polish bands as the Kassela Brothers flourished with a familiar instrumentation that included fiddle, bowed bass, and clarinet. Their neighbor, fiddler and dairy farmer Leonard Romanowski, was an ethnic-hillbilly regular on the "Polish Barn Dance," heard over Rice Lake's WJMC radio from 1939 to 1949 (Leary 1991a).

In Minnesota, meanwhile, Frank Chmielewski brought his fiddle from Poznan to Pine County in the 1880s. His son Tony took up the bow, and grandson Florian's musical memories of the 1930s are of "Dad playing at wedding dances with two violins and a [bowed] bass" (Leary 1990a:6). Florian's son Jeff, Frank's great-grandson, is a fiddler today with a fourth generation Chmielewski Brothers band.

Perhaps inevitably, Jeff Chmielewski draws upon both the distinct and the hybrid strands of his Polish-American musical heritage. He can fiddle Polish dance melodies in an old-time Polish style and put a convincing hoedown stamp on the tunes of Anglo-Americans. But why stop there? He can also make Polish pieces sound American and render American tunes unmistakably Polish. Jeff Chmielewski's deft playing, like Konrad Bercovici's impassioned words, asserts the enduring power of a musical identity that draws upon both the Old World and the New.