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Informant: Felix Milanowski

I called Felix on the evening of November 5 to suggest that we get together sometime. He reckoned I should come over right away. But, since Janet had the car and I wasn't about to walk from Washburn, I suggested a Friday afternoon session. I arrived shortly after one and found Felix (or "Fel" as he is familiarly known) waiting for me in the kitchen. He looked the way I remembered him: of medium height, powerfully built with a bit of a paunch, bald, with fiery alert eyes and a brusque manner. No sooner had I gotten in the door than Felix insisted I sit down. Since Matt Gallman recorded him in May, 1979, Felix had made a recording of much of his repertoire (on a cheap Panasonic recorder and an equally unreliable Cetron tape). He began to play the tape to me and comment on the material. He also showed me two books that were lying on the kitchen table: a Polish-English Dictionary, and songbook which he had used at Holy Family Church - Piesni Koscielne z Melody, or Church Songs with Melodies (Krakow, Poland: ? , 1901). Recalling that Matt had recorded some church songs from Felix, I guessed that the words to many of them might be in this book. Accordingly, I pulled out the song list Felix had compiled for his session with Matt and began, with Felix's assistance, to make correlations between songs in his repertoire and those in the book.

This tactic led to my asking for translations of the titles. Felix was able to give some translations instantly, but with others we were forced to search laboriously through the dictionary. Accordingly, we stopped after about ten titles. Meanwhile, Felix's tape played in the background. As he occasionally pointed out and reminisced about certain tunes, I informed Felix that I needed to tape record an account of his life and whatever he could tell me about the background of context of his playing. Felix said that would be fine and I began to set up the recorder. Eventually, we turned off his tape, he played a tune, and I began interviewing. The session went pretty well. I would stop occasionally to play back the material to Felix and he got a big kick out of it. Midway through the recording, Felix said he had to get something from upstairs.

We went up the stairway, pausing to admire a needlepoint of two bucks clashing. Mrs. Milanowski had done it, with great skill, some thirty years before after a photograph from some magazine (Field and Stream?). Beneath the tapestry, on a

ledge, were small pieces of driftwood and a few painted rocks. Perched on each natural object was a diminutive and brightly colored plastic animal. These were Felix's creations and coincide with a local decorative tradition (I have seen many such animal and driftwood combinations at local bazaars and craft sales). After admiring these works, which Felix termed "beautiful," we entered the upstairs bedroom. It was really a large loft. Everything was in perfect order except for an unmade bed. Felix told me that he figured it "healthy" to let the "bed air out." Elsewhere in the room were portraits of Christ, several crucifixes, athletic pictures and trophies, and a large gun case laden with shotguns and rifles.

Felix's hymn playing and his accounts of the beauty of Holy Family Church had already acquainted me with his religiosity, now I was reminded that Stanley Stangle had spoken of "Fel" as an athlete and a sports man. He had been a champion basketball player in the 1930's and remained an avid hunter. While I was gazing about my surroundings, Felix was searching for some sleighbells. I wasn't sure why, but, when we got downstairs, I discovered that Felix wanted to use them to accompany his accordion version of "The Bells of St. Mary's." Placing the sleighbells on his foot, he jogged them in time to the music. When he finished, Felix mused that it would be wonderful to have a good recording of Holy Family's Church bells. Then he could play his accordion along with the sound of the bells. Much taken with this idea, Felix used the bells to accompany several more tunes.

After a bit we decided that I would return on Wednesday, November 12 - having copied and logged Felix's homemade tape - to record his entire repertoire in an orderly fashion. Ideally, as Felix suggested, we would turn off the machine, let him rehearse a tune once, then make a recording. Felix wanted to get his tunes recorded "right."

With a future appointment made, I decided to make up my equipment, while Felix transferred some fish he'd been thawing from the microwave to the sink. When I asked if he had caught the fish, Felix replied that he was an avid fisherman. And I was lead into his orderly basement for guided inspection of his reels, lures, three outboard motors, sink and knives for fish cleaning, and freezer full of his catch. Felix generously gave me a package of perch filets. I noticed that there were also frozen mushrooms in the freezer, so I asked Felix if he was a mushroom picker. He said that he was and gave a brief account of his family's use of wild

mushrooms since he was a child. As we went upstairs, Felix told me a joke that Joe Belske (Clara Sveda's Dad) used to tell about "Polack" and "Bohunk" mushroom pickers.

Cleverly imitating Belske's "broken English," Felix told a story of Columbus coming to the New World, planting his flag in the sand, and announcing that he was the first European to set foot on this continent. An Indian leapt from behind a bush and informed Columbus that "the Polacks and Bohunks have been comin' here for years to pick mushrooms." I'll have to get this tale on tape.

As I left Felix's, it occurred to me that two themes seem to dominate both his playing and other spheres of his life. One is a rage for order; exemplified by the neatness and cunning with which his equipment was arranged, and by his desire to have his repertoire recorded just "right." The other theme is a desire to embellish and sentimentalize: witness his decorated stones and pieces of wood, his use of sleighbells to accompany his tunes, and his fond reminiscences of how the music used to be.