

ETHNIC HERITAGE
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Informants: Bernice Barnak and Mary Stelmach
Ashland, Wisconsin

Bernice Barnak and Mary Stelmach, ages 76 and 77 respectively, are two members of Holy Family's Polish Conversation Class. They grew up as next door neighbors and close friends on Ashland's east side, and they are still inseparable. Both are spritely, well dressed, charming ladies whose manner belies their age. Curiously, neither ever married. Bernice's father died when she was in her teens, and her mother felt that she should stay home and help raise her younger brothers. Once they had left, Bernice's mother felt she ought to remain and care for mother. Whenever a suitor might appear, the elder Barnak would suddenly appear and begin speaking Polish to her daughter as if they'd not seen each other for some time. The older woman wanted her daughter to marry a Pole and not a Swede ("Swede" meant anyone who wasn't Polish). In her later years Bernice managed a local insurance Company. She had many offers of marriage, but mostly from farmers who wanted someone to aid them with the cows. I didn't get Mary's full story, but she too had "missed the boat" while young and, later on, was loathe to leave her work at Penney's to become a farmer's wife. It's my guess that Bernice and Mary had a good time nonetheless.

The two have sung in Holy Family Church's choir from grade school days until the present. Accordingly, I wanted to record some of their Polish hymns. I called Bernice and Mary to arrange for a session. A few hours later, they called to say that they'd made arrangements to sing for me at the home of Marjorie Guthrie, organist for Holy Family. Although I was concerned that this might not be the best context for a recording session, I said okay. Originally our February 19th session was to be at 1:30, but, as Mrs. Guthrie had company, it was later shifted to 3:30. Matt and I arrived at the appointed hour to find Bernice, Mary, and Marjorie in a mild state of consternation. They were trying to practice a few tunes along with the organ, but none of them were familiar to Marjorie. Polish hymns haven't been performed in Holy Family Church for roughly thirty years. Marjorie's tempos and those of the singers didn't always match, and a few times the singers sang a phrase twice while the organist played it but once.

After a few attempts to recording singing with the organ, we abandoned this tack and turned to accapella performance. Even with this switch, there were a few difficulties. Marjorie had a horny dog who was, for a while, bounding around. It

barked during one song. During another a cuckoo clock chirped; and, one time, Mary brushed the microphone with her song sheet during a "peppy" Christmas hymn.

Most of the hymns came from Holy Family's old Polish hymnbook

. The two women reckoned they had "rescued" their copies from a priest who wanted to burn the books at a time when the church was switching from Polish to English singing. Bernice and Mary began with Easter hymns, then they sang Christmas numbers. They hadn't planned on exactly what to sing ahead of time so there was plenty of deciding, whispering, and page turning in between songs. The ladies' problem was not in finding a song they knew, but in deciding exactly which song to sing. They know a good share of the hymnbook's several hundred entries (including May hymns and less specific ones).

In addition to focussing on seasonal songs, Bernice (with the aid of a friend, Mary Ziolkowski) had written up descriptions of her remembrances of Christmas, Easter, and Polish weddings. It was a slightly formal document and Bernice read it in like fashion, but it proved a useful jumping off point for informal discussions of seasonal and life cycle celebrations. As the tape index shows, the two women mused about caroling in neighbors' houses at Christmastime, about "Dyngus" or Easter Monday when boys would harrass girls with willow whips, about weddings where plates were broken and Mary's brother played on the button accordion.

The two also talked some about house parties and managed to sing a bit of a "dirty song" for the tape. However, they were a little embarrassed and didn't sing as much as they knew. The conversation also covered feather stripping parties and Bernice, especially, recalled some witch tales told during these sessions.

While the session was going on, Marjorie retired to her kitchen to hold the dog at bay. She also kindly offered coffee and homemade donuts to us. While Matt and I were indulging, Mary and Bernice showed us various artifacts they had bought in Poland: amber beads, dolls in peasant costumes, engraved wooden plates. Apparently, their homes are filled with such stuff, including decorated eggs. Mary's mother was an artist at egg decoration and Mary herself practices the old art - although, by her report, she "botches" the process.

By this time it was well past five and approaching the dinner hour, so Matt and I packed up the equipment and thanked our hosts. As often happens, Mary and Bernice were just getting warmed up, and, fortunately, the two of them suggested another session. As we slipped outside, Matt suggested that, aided by a little wine, the two might recall some more house party songs to go along with the hymns. I agreed.