

MUSIC AND SOCIAL LIFE IN EARLY 20TH-CENTURY RURAL POLONIA

Dennis Koliński

[Presented in 1995 at a joint international conference of the Polish American Historical Association and Instytut Badań Polonijnych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, *Polish Americans in the USA*, in Kraków, Poland. To be included in an upcoming publication of the conference's papers.]

Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota are home to an exceptionally large number of settlements founded by Poles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The vast majority of them are rural in character and to a great degree, the Poles that settled there as farmers were from the Prussian Partition. Wisconsin's rural Polish population was particularly homogeneous--80% of them originated from the Poznań region and Pomerania (primarily Kaszubs).

This article seeks to examine the musical and dance traditions of Polish immigrants in that region,¹ supplemented by information from other centers of rural Polonia in Wisconsin and Michigan. It will highlight some of the characteristics of this folkloric genre in that region and outline the major factors that transformed it during the course of the twentieth century.

In descriptions of village life from the nineteenth century, both ethnographers and amateur observers noted that one of the most popular forms of entertainment for the Polish "folk" was dance and song. Any and all occasions were considered appropriate for a dance, especially weddings, baptisms, Sundays, and holidays.² Similar to most elements of folk culture, music and dance were not merely forms of pure entertainment as they are today, but also functioned within the context of other parts of village life. They were the product of one people's vision of the surrounding world and their relationship to it, as well as to each other. The study of folklore, therefore, examines such elements of village life and "attempts to analyze ... traditions (both content and process) so as to reveal the common life of the human mind apart from what is contained in the formal records of culture that compose the heritage of a people."³ Something as simple as a people's musical and dance folklore can help us to understand something about their psyche. The words in their songs provide us with texts that help us decipher some of their innermost feelings and values. The character of a people's music and dance tells us about their temperament and an analysis of the elements found in them helps interpret a culture's evolution, revealing tendencies toward either preservation or change at any given period.

More than mere entertainment, folklore served vital social functions. Its importance within the total framework of village culture was recognized by ethnographers and

12. Unless indicated otherwise, information contained in this article specifically about the traditional music and dance of central Wisconsin is based upon field research conducted in 1984 by the author under the auspices of the Wisconsin Folklife Center. This research included both extensive interviews with long-time musicians and others from that area, as well as instrumental recordings (primarily concertina; only Joe Formella and Wenzel Albrecht still played traditional fiddle). Interviews were conducted with: Wenzel Albrecht, Sylvester Check, Ambrozy (Amos) Cyran, Joseph Formella, Clem Jablonski, Joseph Janowski, Philip Klesmith, Victor (Kluczykowski) Kluck, Louis Laszewski, Alice Omernik, Vince Pientka, Al Prondzinski, Al Serafin, Dominic Slusarski, Frank Strojny. Some of the results from this research were published in an article the following year in the local Stevens Point newspaper. Dennis L. Koliński, "Polish Dance," *Stevens Point Daily Journal-REACH* (24 August 1985): 5.

13. Koliński, "The Rural Polonia of Central Wisconsin: A Cultural View," a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Polish American Historical Association, in Washington, D.C., January 1993. Continuation of their Old World village traditions was probably very characteristic of rural settlements because traditional music and dance is always more likely to be found in poorly industrialized isolated regions such as the rural Upper Midwest. ("Folk Music," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 19 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1988), 316.). Located far from major cities in isolated (and sometimes heavily forested) locales, these Polish colonies tended to form tightly-knit communities that mixed little with other nearby nationalities. In autonomous cultural settings such as these folkways are more durable. (Eugene E. Obidinski and Helen Stankiewicz Zand, *Polish Folkways in America: Community and Family* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987), 12. (from: Clark Wissler, "The Conflict and Survival of Culture," *The Golden Age of American Anthropology*, ed. Margaret Mead (New York: Braziller, 1960) 601.))

14. Marian and Jadwiga Sobieski, "Instrukcja dla zbieraczy folkloru muzycznego," *Polska muzyka ludowa i jej problemy* (Kraków, Poland: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1973), 447. List, "Folk Music," 363. Koliński, Field research. *Down Home Dairyland*, A program of traditional and ethnic music of Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest, #23--"Pulaski is a Polka Town," produced by the Wisconsin Arts Board, the Wisconsin Folk Museum of Mount Horeb, and Wisconsin Public Radio, hosted by: Richard March, Wisconsin Arts Board, Traditional and Ethnic Arts Coordinator, and James P. Leary, folklorist at University of Wisconsin-Madison and Wisconsin Folk Museum. Original air date: 5-5-90.

15. Collections of folk songs, such as *Folk Songs out of Wisconsin* contained only those sung in English, without so much as recognizing that non-Anglo-Saxon peoples, who populated extensive areas of the state possessed an oral and sung folklore which in all practical respects also constituted part of the state's traditions. *Folk Songs out of Wisconsin*, ed. Harry B. Peters (Madison: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1977. Large concentrations of Poles, Germans, Norwegians, and Swedes were found throughout Wisconsin. Smaller and less numerous but significant concentrations of Czechs, Danes, Dutch, Belgians, and Swiss (as well as numerous other ethnic groups) were also found. From the 1830s until the end of World War I, large numbers of immigrants settled Wisconsin's rural territories. Officially, the state even conducted a promotional campaign to attract immigrants in order to settle

its vast uninhabited territories as quickly as possible. (Dennis Koliński, "Poles in Agriculture," awaiting publication.). This massive influx of foreign stock, which quickly became integral to the composition of the state's population, commenced before the establishment of Wisconsin as an official U.S. Territory in 1836 and admittance to the Union as a state in 1848.

16. One of the most prolific of these collectors was Oskar Kolberg, a nineteenth-century Polish composer who originally began collecting folk melodies for use in his compositions. Fascinated by the richness of Polish folk music, he spent the majority of his life collecting folk songs, melodies, and other aspects of folk culture from many regions of Poland. Over 80 volumes based on his documentation were published during his lifetime and posthumously under the title, *Dziela Wszystkie*. Although Kolberg did not engage in analysis of the materials he collected, his contribution to the study of Polish and Slavic folklore was so enormous and unprecedented in European folklore, that it constitutes a seminal resource for all future studies into Polish and Slavic folklore.

17. Much of this was based on the conviction common among many Americans into the twentieth century, that immigrants from central, southern, and eastern Europe were biologically, psychologically, and intellectually inferior to the "Anglo-Saxon race." Dennis L. Koliński, *Obrzęd weselny w społeczeństwie polonijnym powiatu Portage, Wisconsin, USA* (M.A. dissertation, Jagiellonian University, 1984), 13-14.

18. Based on the limited recordings of Polish songs available from the rural Midwest, four major themes stand out: songs about love (not infrequently about the disappointment of two young people in love who are prevented by circumstances from marrying), songs about work, religious hymns, and Christmas carols (which are really a special category of hymn). They are usually sung in a full-throated manner without harmony. They are generally songs that were well-known in the Polish village and display attributes characteristic of typical Polish folk song. Beginning in the 1970s, when the ethnic awareness movement alerted many third and fourth generation ethnics to the disappearance of tradition-bearers among their older relatives, some amateurs made recordings of older family members which on occasion included old traditional songs. Although they lack a solid ethnographic methodology, these recordings may one day provide the basis for a systematic study of traditional Polish song in the rural Midwest if enough samples can be found.

19. In addition to systematic field research and recording conducted in 1984 by the author of this article, three archival recordings made of rural Polish Americans in the Upper Midwest earlier in this century provide us with valuable, albeit limited, ethnomusicological documentation. They were done in Wisconsin by Robert Draves in 1941, (Helene Stratman-Thomas recording project of ethnic immigrant music in Wisconsin. Although Helene Stratman-Thomas usually travelled into the field herself to conduct interviews, make recordings, and gather pertinent documentation, the first trip in 1941 to record Polish immigrants in Stevens Point, Wisconsin was made only by her audio engineer, Robert Draves. This turned out to be very fortunate because his recording session with a Góral named Jan Cieszczyk yielded much valuable material and was longer than Stratman-Thomas herself typically conducted. Although I have never personally seen or heard the materials, Anne Pellowski, known for her children's books based on the life of Polish

→ no Harriet Paulowska
[Lib of C/WI reference]

Kaszubs in Wisconsin's Trempealeau County, supposedly made recordings of Polish music in that same area for the Library of Congress. (Konrad Bercovici made recordings of Polish songs and instrumental music in the vicinity of Posen, Michigan for the Library of Congress in the 1920s. Lomax made a series of recordings of Polish songs and instrumental music in the vicinity of Posen, Michigan for the Library of Congress in 1938. In more recent times, folklorists Richard March, director of the Wisconsin Arts Board Folk Arts Program and Jim Leary, director of the Wisconsin Folk Arts Museum, recorded traditional instrumental music and songs among many of Wisconsin's ethnic groups, including the Polish.) (Down Home Dairyland, A program of traditional and ethnic music of Wisconsin and the Upper Midwest, #4--"Old-Time Music in Stevens Point," (original air date: 2-26-89) #18--"The Polish Fiddlers of Posen," (original air date: 4-1-90) and #23--"Pulaski is a Polka Town," (original air date: 5-5-90) produced by the Wisconsin Arts Board, the Wisconsin Folk Museum of Mount Horeb, and Wisconsin Public Radio, hosted by: Richard March, Wisconsin Arts Board, Traditional and Ethnic Arts Coordinator, and James P. Leary, folklorist at University of Wisconsin-Madison and Wisconsin Folk Museum. Based primarily on interviews with living musicians, the recording and commentary reflect both historical and contemporary musical forms.)

J.P. Leary

20. Greg Zurowski from Stevens Point, Wisconsin told ~~Richard March~~ in an interview that in years past he remembered a large number of two-piece bands in that area. From *Down Home Dairyland*, #4, "Old-Time Music in Stevens Point."

21. Many older Polish Americans in rural areas today still remember fiddlers who played for gatherings even as late as the 1930s.

22. A few fiddles originally brought over from Poland by immigrant musicians are still extant in central Wisconsin but the majority of them seem to have been lost. There were some local craftsmen, who followed an old village tradition by crafting their own fiddles. However, it has been difficult to locate any of them and ascertain anything more concrete about them. This is based on interviews conducted in 1984 with traditional musicians in the Stevens Point, Wisconsin area. Koliński, Field research.

23. The clarinet sometimes superseded the first fiddle and played the lead melody.

24. James P. Leary, "Polka Music, Ethnic Music: A Report on Wisconsin's Polka Traditions," Wisconsin Folk Museum, Bulletin No.1, 3. Victor Greene also noted that until the mid-1920s, *wiejska* music dominated Polonia, ie. music played at a slower tempo on fiddles and bass fiddles. Greene, *A Passion*, 191.

25. *Obereks*, *kujawiaks*, and *mazurkas*, which characterized much of central Polish folk music, were related melodies and dances in 3/8 and 3/4 time. Waltzes in 3/4 time were a newer musical and dance form.

26. Krakowiaks, very characteristic for southern Poland, were melodies in 2/4 time. Fiddler, Joe Formella used to play a few krakowiaks in his central Wisconsin band during the interwar period, but he said they weren't too popular then. Koliński, Field research. The

predominance of melodies in 3/8 and 3/4 time was logical considering the regions of Poland from which most Poles to central Wisconsin came.

27. This is a dance in 2/4 time, which was known to many musicians I interviewed in central Wisconsin. Joe Formella was even able to provide a description of the steps. He claimed that the dance itself was very old but that the melody he played for me was composed by a local musician named John Cikosz. (Koliński, Field research). I have not yet been able to find any mention of a dance in Poland under this name, therefore it is difficult to even theorize about its origins.

28. "The Cap Dance." This is a Kaszubian dance, which can be found in central and western Poland--the region from which many Poles in central Wisconsin originated. In this dance two men and two women two-step in a figure-eight pattern around four caps laid in a row on the floor. The description of this dance was given to me by Joe Formella. He said that it was a very beautiful dance and that people loved to watch it. (Koliński, Field research).

29. "The Broom Dance." A mixer dance using a broom, which was well-known in the western regions of Poland

30. Some in central Wisconsin called this dance *Kaschmidt*, instead of *Herr Schmidt*. Some consider this to be a German dance. In fact, it is still known among some Germans in Wisconsin. However, it is not at all clear whether the dance was learned here in America from German neighbors or if Polish immigrants brought the dance from Poland. Central Wisconsin had a very high percentage of Polish immigrants from the Kaszuby region of Pomerania where Polish Kaszubs and Germans lived alongside each other for centuries. This resulted in much intercultural borrowing. A dance in 2/4 time named *Kowal*, which was danced with hand-clapping in the Kujawy region, was borrowed from the German or Czech dance named *Herr Schmidt*. Oskar Kolberg notes this in the second half of the nineteenth century, so it is conceivable that Poles may have known such a dance before immigrating to central Wisconsin. Oskar Kolberg, *Dziela Wszystkie: Kujawy, część II*, 4 (Wrocław, Poland: Polski Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze, 1962/1867), 207.

31. *Cebula* (Onion) is a playful dance from the Rzeszów region. Once after a performance of this dance by a central Wisconsin folkloric ensemble, "Wisła Polish Dancers," a man who grew up in the Polish community of Shantytown (located on the border between Portage and Marathon Counties) commented that he remembered this dance from his youth.

32. *Przysiady* are the fancy squat-kicks characteristic for many Slavic dances. The two documented cases known to us in central Wisconsin involved a Podlasiak (from Międzyrzec in present-day eastern Poland) and a Góral (from Ratułów in the Podhale region of southern Poland).

33. Koliński, Field research. *Down Home Dairyland*, #18, "The Polish Fiddlers of Posen."

34. The mechanism involved here is the absorption of new elements that are modified so as to be compatible with the already existing folkloric elements. In this manner, it does not reflect the substitution of new cultural elements at the expense of existing indigenous