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Oral History: Anonymous 1

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Interview held on July 10th, 2017, interviewee to remain anonymous

BRETT: Today is July 10, 2017. My name is Brett Cotter and I'm here with [Anonymous] and we both consent to having our voices on this recording. So if you could just share some of the just most basic details of your life. When did you come to Worcester, etc?

Interviewee: I've lived in Worcester all my life. I went to St. Mary's school all the way through. I went to Anna Maria College. I became a teacher, a special-ed teacher in Worcester. And I just retired two years ago from Worcester public schools. I'm not married. I have one sister. Still live in the house I grew up in.

BRETT: 00:54 What did your parents do for a living?

Interviewee: My father was a self-employed grocer with Sheffield Markets owned by my grandfather. And my mother was a comptometrist and worked with some kind of adding machine, which no longer exists probably, at the American Steel and Wire in Worcester.

BRETT: 01:19 American Steel and Wire employed a lot of people...

Interviewee: Including my grandfather, my mother's father. They worked together until they retired. I don't know of any other job he had so he probably got that job as soon as he came here from Poland. I think it was probably in the early 1900s, probably in his early teens I'd say...

BRETT: 01:46 What side of 290 was the store that your father...?

Interviewee: On the same side as our house. It was right down the street from my mother's house, actually, on Perry Ave., but it was called Suffield Market. There were a lot of markets in the neighborhood, actually. There was the one across the street from them. I don't know the name of that one. And there was another market down on Seymour Street down from me Stock-it Market. There were a lot of small markets, they weren't big supermarkets that I know of.

BRETT: 02:23 Did they sell a lot of Polish kinds of...

Interviewee: They specialize in homemade kielbasa. They also had some other Polish things, um, like proziaki and stuff like that, but not a lot really, I would say.

BRETT: 02:41 Okay. So when you were growing up in the neighborhood, are there any memories of festivities and celebrations that focused on Polish heritage?

Interviewee: Well it'd most be from the church, which is a couple of streets away, and the school. There used to be what they used to call a bazaar, that they would have. I think it was just in the fall, it still is in the fall. And then village things like processions and things like that. Further down Millbury Street and Water Street and Green Street there were a lot of Polish stores, especially on Millbury Street, there were different Polish organizations. There was the PNI, I think on Millbury Street. I think that was one of the newer organizations. On Green Street there was the White Eagles Club, there was the Polish-American Vets, which is now I think Fiddler's Green or something. And there used to be what was known as the "Bucket of

Blood” down the islands. That was the PNA. They all had bars, you know, I mean... I remember things like that. A lot of weddings took place at the Polish White Eagles club or the...any of those... I don't think the PNA but, um, that's where people had their wedding receptions, or their, what we used to call them “Greenback showers”, things like that. There also used to be a little Lithuanian club up the hill on the corner of Winthrop and Vernon Street, which a lot of Polish people used for weddings and showers and things like that there. As far as dances, there used to be the dances at St. Mary's school, but I wouldn't say it was Polish related, I mean, but mostly everyone that went to that school were Polish. I didn't know very many non-Polish kids until I went to college. And my neighborhood itself used to be mostly Polish. There very rarely would be Irish or Lithuanian. There weren't any African-Americans or Spanish at that time in the neighborhood. But gradually people have moved away. I and a neighbor across the street are the only ones there since I was born.

BRETT: 05:45 Okay. I was just remembering when you were talking about the PNA, you said something about a Bucket of Blood...

Interviewee: Bucket of Blood...[laughs]. I think it was a little bit rough you know on Saturday nights or something like that. They were drunks, you know. I mean, you have that with any nationality. I think that one was particularly rough. And I just remember hearing it was called the Bucket of Blood.

BRETT: 06:14 Awesome. You mentioned a lot of stuff there. Those organizations that you were talking about, were you or your parents members of those organizations?

Interviewee: I wasn't. I remember going to the White Eagle Club. They used to have gymnastics at one time taught by a woman named Regi Wolanin. She's still alive. She's in her 80s, I think. But she used to run that. And we just signed up for it. I mean, it wasn't anything my parents belonged to. But my parents were friendly with her. She kind of recruited the kids, stuff like that.

BRETT: 06:57 So were there any memories of challenges that you or the community faced?

Interviewee: Because of being Polish?

BRETT: 07:10 Because of being Polish or because just, you know, just in terms of some common challenge.

Interviewee: I don't remember really. There weren't that many Polish politicians. There used to be a barbershop on Millbury Street that I think most of the Polish guys would go to. And the man who ran that was Mr. Zalinski. Your mother and I went to school with his daughter Pauline, they used to live up on Vernon Street. He was very politically oriented, I think, with the guys coming in and discussing things. I don't know if he ever ran for office but I think he was the type of person that would get people to put signs on their lawns, or whatever, for whatever. But I don't remember any Polish politicians elected to office or anything like that. You know, I think they did go there to discuss probably the issues of the day or something. But I thought it was a great neighborhood growing up. I don't remember any

crime, it was clean. It's not clean anymore. And I've seen it since I was a kid. But Polish people who owned the houses don't own those houses anymore. I think just those people moving away... and it's pathetic, it's rundown. As far as any other issues, I don't remember any discrimination against us or anything like that, so... We had the idyllic childhood, I think.

BRETT: 09:11 When I was interviewing someone else they told a story about how somebody they knew was stabbed near Crompton Park...

Interviewee: Gene Niksa.

BRETT: Gene Niksa?

Interviewee: Gene Niksa's *brother*. But I mean that was later. You know, we were in high school when it happened.

BRETT: 09:34 And was that something way out of the ordinary?

Interviewee: Yeah, it was. I thought it was. And we were shocked.

BRETT: It was right at Crompton Park, it was close.

Interviewee: Yes, yes.

BRETT: Did anything come of it?

Interviewee: I don't remember anybody being arrested for it. I don't remember.

BRETT: 09:55 I was just wondering.

Interviewee: Yeah

BRETT: Because one of my other interviewees mentioned something about that.

Interviewee: Who was that?

BRETT: It was my mother actually.

Interviewee: Oh, ok. But I thought that was very unusual. I don't remember a lot of robberies or..., I don't know I don't. I don't know.

BRETT: 10:17 So this is before, way before you guys actually... But in 1960, the 290 expressway was built that cut through Worcester...

Interviewee: It cut the neighborhood in half.

BRETT: 10:31 It did.

Interviewee: It didn't do us any good. I mean, even if you go down to Millbury Street, all the streets no longer go up to, say, Lord Street or any of the other streets. I mean, I remember as a kid we used to go to the girls club up the hill and on Fridays my mother would pick us up and we'd go down to Millbury Street to go pick up Fish and Chips or something, And it used to be you'd have to go a different way and you'd be going down the other streets and I'd be thinking: The streets are no longer there! And I think it really broke the neighborhood apart, you know. That was the downhill of the neighborhood, I think.

BRETT: 11:19 Was there any sense of isolation between...

Interviewee: Yeah, I think a lot of people lived on the other side, down the island... I forgot what it was called...

BRETT: 11:31 Green Island?

Interviewee: Yeah, Green Island. You know, you can no longer go down the street to, you know, to find a friend's house or whatever, and you have to go all the way around under the bridge, like on Seymour Street or down Endicott Street. It was weird. And the church being so close to that 290, I mean, we

could be sitting there in church and all you'd hear are the cars zooming by or something running. It was hard.

BRETT: 11:59 Definitely. So this is switching topics...

Interviewee: Yes.

BRETT: 12:11 You mentioned earlier there were more people than non-Polish people who lived in the neighborhood.

Interviewee: Yes.

BRETT: 12:21 Around when did you start noticing that kind of change?

Interviewee: Since the 70s I'd say, or maybe late 60s,--early 70s, I think. I don't know, maybe people didn't like the expressway, I don't know.

BRETT: 12:41 You mentioned that African Americans that were moving in or...

Interviewee: No, I say there were mostly Hispanics, some Asians, not too many African-Americans, really. I just know it's not as Polish anymore.

BRETT: 13:06 And when these people started moving in, did they interact with the Polish-American community or did they keep more to themselves?

Interviewee: I think they kept more to themselves, especially because of the language. They weren't really that fluent in English. They, you know... the Hispanics that lived next door were friendly with them, but a lot of the other people in the other neighborhood, you know, had lived there for years and you might wave at them. But, sometimes, you know, those are not the same people that were there. There's not much continuity of people living there for years and years. You know, it's a lot of in and out, in and out, and I don't know if they own a house or houses now.

BRETT: 13:57 This is going back to Polish people. I have heard from other interviewees that from some people's point of view there was almost a rift between Polish-Americans and Polish immigrants. Could you see something like that?

Interviewee: A little. I would say a little. Polish-Americans that have been there since, you know, the early 1900s, I mean they got jobs, and some of their children really didn't keep the Polish language, I would say. And I think that the Polish immigrants that are coming now are more educated. I go to the Polish mass on Sundays and it's mostly all the newer Polish immigrants that are coming now. And right now we have a Polish pastor who is a fairly new immigrant also and I think that some people in the parish seem to think that he's kind of catering to those people. I mean, they are more educated. They have better jobs. I don't think they're sending their children to our St. Mary's School because anytime I say anything about St. Mary's, and I look at a list of names, there's hardly any Polish names in there. There are a lot more African that are coming, a lot of Middle Eastern, you know. I think our parish is kind of losing that base of Polish people who sent their kids to St. Mary's, and they got married in St. Mary's, and they raise their kids at St. Mary's... I don't see us having that anymore. And I think that some people are just thinking that they're doing a lot more for the newer immigrants that are coming in. A lot of services maybe just be in Polish. I know a friend of mine said: Well, what would you want to go to that for? I don't really understand the language anymore.

Because if you don't use it you lose it, and I think there is a little bit of a, like you say, rift there. But, they are supporting the parish. And, in a few years, you know, it's just like when we were growing up, I think. I don't know, it's a different situation.

BRETT: 17:04 It is.

Interviewee: I mean, the people that came over years and years ago, they had children that went to St. Mary's and maintained the language and the customs, but also they learned English. And I think a lot of the kids who are coming over now, I mean, I worked in the public school, and they're coming to the public schools instead of learning English. I taught at Lakeview and had a little girl that came over when she was in first grade and within the year, she was practically at the top of her class. So, it's different.

BRETT: 17:42 How far back is that? Do you think it goes back all the way to the 70s or 80s?

Interviewee: No, I don't think so. I think it's relatively new, within the last... maybe twenty years, I would say. Not that much of a difference, but...

BRETT: 18:04 Not really.

Interviewee: It's different.

BRETT: 18:11 I don't have any other questions, but, if there are any last remarks you would like to make on the Polish American community?

Interviewee: Well, I've enjoyed being close to the Polish American community, but, I don't think my parents were really good joiners outside of my father belonging to the Booster's at St. Mary's and my mother belonging to the woman's club. They weren't big on the Polish American Veteran, or anything like that. My father would have never joined that. I think after World War II he didn't want to have anything to do with the service. There are some other organizations that, you know, still maintain some of the traditions, especially like the Women's Guild of St. Mary's. But, you know, even that is kind of [...] Within the Women's Guild, you know, we have two tables set up. The Polish immigrants have one table and the other people have the other table. But we do things to support the parish and the school, and just cooking is, you know, one thing. But they do a lot for the school, and the kids, and offer scholarships and things like that. So I still enjoy a lot of it. It's sad to see a lot of people that I grew up with not belong to St. Mary's... they don't belong anymore. But to me, the Polish American community *is* Saint Mary's. I know there's a Quo Vadis Club but, have you interviewed anyone about that?

BRETT: 20:00 I did actually, John Kraska.

Interviewee: I don't know, it seems a lot of the Polish families that have come on over now, a lot of the younger ones aren't living in Worcester, a lot live in Millbury, I think. Well, I don't know what else to say but...

BRETT: Well, thank you!

Interviewee: Oh, okay!