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Oral History: Richard Lewandowski

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Interview with Father Richard Lewandowski

BRETT: Today is July 14, 2017. My name is Brett Cotter and I'm here with Father Richard Lewandowski. I consent to having my voice on this recording, and Father Lewandowski, do you consent to have your voice on this recording?

PRIEST L: I do.

BRETT: Okay. So when were you born?

PRIEST L: I was born April 16, 1948.

BRETT: 00:28 What did your parents do for a living? Were they living in Worcester?

PRIEST L: They were living in Worcester at the time. In fact they were living in Worcester all of their entire lives. My father worked at American Steel and Wire, I believe it was on Ballad Street. And my mother stayed at home. We had nine kids in our family, so she had to stay relatively busy taking care of nine kids going to Catholic schools, and just taking care of us, you know? I say Catholic schools because we had uniforms in those days, and you had to wear white shirts, and that's before the days of permanent-press clothing and she was ironing every day and washing every day. Seven boys, two girls.

BRETT: 01:14 Wow. Were your parents a part of any clubs, or anything like the White Eagle Club?

PRIEST L: My father belonged to the St. Mary's Booster's and the Polish American Veterans; my mother, no. She didn't drive so she wouldn't be able to attend those different types of clubs. And I think she had just enough to do taking care of us.

BRETT: 01:41 Sure. Could you maybe just tell me a little about your days at St. Mary's?

PRIEST L: Ah, oh ya. When you talk about thirteen years, kindergarten through graduation from high school... then a lot of things... I guess what I liked about St. Mary's was I really did enjoy my time at school because it was almost like a community center school, a place with all kinds of activities; friends were there. All the kids in school that were with us were friends with one another and a lot of our activities centered around the church and the school. Grammar school, it was a little more of just staying at school than... Well I guess I was in about the fifth grade when I became an altar boy, and so if they had funerals, we'd get out of school to be able to serve the funerals and ... Then in high school, very actively involved in all kinds of different clubs and attended all the sports events that we had at St. Mary's. It was really a community center, parish, school...

BRETT: 03:04 I've heard it described as a family.

PRIEST L: Ya, it was. In fact, so much so that, even now, two of my kindergarten classmates and I go down to Monroe, Connecticut, maybe once a month, once every six weeks, to visit some of the sisters who are still living. So, they made an impact on us. And, you know, when we were younger and we had to have a lot more responsibilities with work and stuff, we kind of separated ourselves from them, but then afterwards as we got older, the

sisters at St. Mary's—we'd go down there to visit them. And like I said, we do regularly now too about every six weeks, which I think is pretty amazing because some of them—my kindergarten sister died within the last year. I mean, that's something else, you know? And the others; the chemistry teacher, the biology teacher—they're still there and they're still living.

BRETT: 04:16 So when you were at St. Mary's would you have heard more English or Polish being spoken as you listened in the hallways?

PRIEST L: English only.

BRETT: English only?

PRIEST L: Ya, I mean we had a Polish class...I don't know if it was a couple of times a week; it was very, very basic, like the sounds, how to do the alphabet and stuff. But there wasn't really a whole lot of Polish there.

BRETT: 04:51 Was there a sizeable population of Poles that immigrated to America?

PRIEST L: I guess there were—and I'm thinking that after World War II there must have been a sizeable population that came in. But by the time I was in school, we had some families that had moved in from Europe, whether they were displaced people in Germany, or displaced from Brazil as well, they did end up in Worcester somehow.

BRETT: 05:35 From Brazil?

PRIEST L: Ya.

BRETT: What ethnicity were they?

PRIEST L: Polish.

BRETT: 05:40 Okay.

PRIEST L: Ya. It's amazing that every place... The more I traveled the more I realized how many Polish people there are—I was in Hawaii, and there was the waiter waiting on us and he was a young kid, probably your age, you know, "Koslowski", and I thought, I mean, he looked so Hawaiian you couldn't believe it. Well, evidently, the time that my grandfather came to the United States, he came through Europe and his grandfather came to Hawaii by way of Asia and then ended up in Hawaii. But I thought, well, it's amazing the see so many.... Everywhere you go you see Polish people now. And I think a lot is because of the war, there were a lot of people displaced. Whether it was World War I like my grandfather, or whether it was World War II like that other Koslowski's father, or grandfather. It was in Poland at that time too.

BRETT: 06:51 So when you were living in Worcester and in Our Lady of Czestochowa, were there any festivals or celebrations that focused on Polishness?

PRIEST L: Yes. I remember the Polish vets used to have a big summer picnic down at Doherty Pond, and you know, with rides and games and food and stuff like that. At the parish itself we'd have the bazaar and functions. I think a couple of times there was a winter bazaar around Christmastime, then afterwards, in summer, there'd be a bazaar as well.

BRETT: 07:44 So, I asked about Polish immigrants earlier. Were there any non-Polish immigrants that moved into the neighborhood while you were living there?

PRIEST L: As far as the immigrants themselves, I would say no. The immigrants that I've been aware of would be those that signed up to the parish that were of Polish extraction, and I think later on I remember there were Lithuanian immigrants who came from Lithuania, again after World War II. I became familiar with them, but those were the two that I would have been most familiar with.

BRETT: 08:35 Okay. So here's where I pose a specific question about I-290. You were living there before its construction and were able to see probably a good before and after picture. In your opinion, do you think that the construction of 290 through the Polish-American neighborhood was detrimental to the community?

PRIEST L: I think so, very, very much. What it did was really slice the neighborhood, the Polish-American neighborhood, in half. There were those of us who lived on one side of Millbury Street, and that would be the one toward Quinsigamond Ave., and that neighborhood, afterwards, was pretty much decimated. That's when we moved out of that neighborhood, actually, and moved up on Dorchester Street by Worcester Academy. And that wasn't the only reason we moved; because we had a lot of kids and needed more space, so we ended up buying a home up there. But the neighborhood on the side of Millbury Street that again, goes down to Quinsigamond Ave., and Crompton Park, that whole area, that was a very... I'd say blue-collar residential neighborhood. People kept up their homes, though. The Polish people who lived there, they were basically... that was a Polish area. And the people that lived there kept up their homes and kept up their property. And once the expressway came through they got rid of some the streets like Taylor Street, and I don't know if it was Wade Street. Richland Street no longer went down to Millbury Street. It kind of isolated the community; you had to go up to Endicott Street to be able to get to the school and to the parish. I think it really had a disastrous affect. One that is not so uncommon, as I'm seeing now, as what took place in Chicago and Detroit. They would go through the neighborhoods and basically—what we might call inner-city because the blue-collar factory workers lived in those neighborhoods—they just made a slot right through there and got rid of the houses and really destructed their neighborhoods quite substantially.

BRETT: 11:18 So then, did it have an affect, not only on the people who lived there, but on businesses too?

PRIEST L: It did because—and I'm thinking mostly of Millbury Street and Water Street... Remember the bakeries ended up closing and some of the markets that were there ended up closing? It did have an effect, an adverse effect.

BRETT: 11:50 So, I'm changing topics to your experience in the priesthood. You served as a priest in St. Joseph's in Webster and later Our Lady of Czestochowa, and I was just wondering if you could maybe reflect on those both, maybe compare the two communities?

PRIEST L: Ya, being in a Polish-American parish was very comfortable because the heritage, it helped me to learn the language. Actually, I learned more Polish being in a Polish parish than I could have at home or at school because I would use it. And I'm still able to speak Polish, I mean, it's not excellent, of course, but I'm able to get by when I'm in Poland. I can get by in just about every circumstance I find myself. But it was a very—you know, if I think of how I felt being in those parishes, it was very warm, hearing the Christmas carols, the marrying hymns, the Easter songs, you know, during mass. Listening to people speaking Polish, having the Polish festivals of the women who would be making ... This was before I was a priest, but they used to even have, they'd make Paczki. Have you ever smelled Paczki? Well, my grandmother used to go over to the school and make Paczki and have Paczki sales to help raise funds for the school or for the parish. But afterwards, we would have festivals like at St. Joseph's—it was a *huge* three-day festival. It was outdoors and it was fun! It was a lot of fun, a lot of work. You'd see people coming together. They felt that they had a common purpose in trying to preserve the school and the parish. And so they came out. St. Joseph's was similar to St. Mary's and Our Lady of Czestochowa in that... I guess it was a community as well as a school, as well as a parish. But I tell you, all very warm feelings and, again... When I was first ordained I found it kind of difficult to speak Polish and if I were ever preaching I'd get all nervous that I was going to mess up my Polish. I would always have it written because I couldn't just speak off the cuff. Well, I could, and the people would listen, they were very polite, but it's one thing talking one-to-one to a person rather than to a group of people. You have to be a little more polished and I wasn't quite that polished yet with my Polish.

BRETT: 14:46 When you were at either Our Lady of Czestochowa or St. Joseph's, was there a sizeable immigrant population that you had to speak Polish to?

PRIEST L: Yes, there were at both places, actually. I think after the Solidarity problem with Poland, there were a lot of people that came to both Worcester and Webster. I found it to be a different type of population. My grandparents, they were not as well educated. The people who came to the U. S. with the Solidarity wave were certainly far better educated. Some of them were professors up at UMass Medical School, and I remember WPI and I believe Worcester State College, too. So there were a lot more well educated people.

BRETT: 15:52 Were there similar kinds of festivals that celebrated Polishness at St. Joseph's as well?

PRIEST L: Yes, the St. Joseph's parish festival was huge, as I said it was a three-day celebration. They'd have Polka bands, and have Polka masses. It celebrated being Polish, you know, but it was also celebrating the community. The Polish foods always went, you know the pierogi, gołąbki, kielbasa, kipusta, they would make all those good Polish foods. But then also like on Friday someone made clam chowder, and made clam fritters as well, which is hardly Polish. But it went. Now it's hot dogs and hamburgers, the usual stuff that would take place that you'd have at a

picnic or festival. The Polish food always ran out. They would make thousands of pierogi and they would all sell. It was amazing.

BRETT: 17:02 So when you were serving in either parish, was there any point when you or the community had to address some sort of tension or challenge?

PRIEST L: When I was at St. Joseph's, I don't recall any major difficulties that occurred. The Polish population in Webster was quite substantial and working with the town, and stuff was always quite easy. It was only an elementary school and I'm thinking in terms of the sports when the kids were playing basketball or something. They were always able to get one of the public school gyms to be able to practice and stuff. We didn't have any major problems. I don't recall any minor problems. And at Our Lady of Czestochowa there was, when I was already ordained, I think there was always the question of the concern about the school, that the school would continue. How major was it? I don't know.

BRETT: 18:30 That was at Our Lady of Czestochowa?

PRIEST L: Czestochowa, St. Mary's school. But I don't recall any major problems that had occurred at either place. Like I said, it was that back-of-the-mind concern about would we be able to continue with the school, but...

BRETT: 18:52 Was that only at Our Lady of Czestochowa parish or did you have similar concerns at St. Joseph's?

PRIEST L: No, not at St. Joseph's. There was no concern that when I was serving there that was going to close because there were a lot of kids around, it was a good school, the parents would send them there and felt confident that they were getting a very good education, and good discipline. I don't think there was ever a problem there with that.

BRETT: 19:16 Okay. This is slightly related, but it's about Pope John Paul II. When he was elected it was obviously a huge boost, if you will, for the Polish-American community. Could you maybe reflect about what that meant to you at the time?

PRIEST L: Ya, I had seen John Paul II when he was a Cardinal up in Michigan at the Orchard Lakes Schools and went to St. Mary's College in St. Cyril and Methodius Seminary, and it was ironic when I saw him there and heard him speak. His English was not all that great but you can understand him. And when he spoke he spoke to the students and I thought—I told my buddy, I says; That guy's going to be Pope, he's going to be Pope! Listen to him, he's so good! He was Cardinal and when I heard that he was named the Pope I got the chills because, you know, at that time, being Polish was not looked at as being benevolent as it is now. There was a lot of Polish jokes, and there was a real negative about thing: the dumb Polacks. And I remember the sisters, Sister Benedict especially at school, telling us that because we were Polish we would have to probably work twice as hard and perform twice as well in order to get half the credit for anything that we did. And there was that negativity for Polish people being Polish. And when I worked at Michigan it wasn't like that, though. There was a lot of people over there in the Detroit area who were Polish-American so you didn't find that prejudice. But when I heard that that

Pope was elected it was like: Oh, my gosh! And that Pope—it's like the only Pope, like he was the only Pope that was elected, but that's... You know, I still think of him, and there was tremendous pride. I had personally tremendous pride that John Paul II was elected. And there were big things that occurred after that. He was almost bigger than history, he was bigger than the church, he was bigger than everything because he was quite a powerful man. And the more I had read about him and the more I got to now about him, I was really impressed with what he could do even as a young priest in a campus ministry position. I was at Worcester Polytechnic as a campus minister and in Fitchburg State College... Fitchburg State University now, and I heard he was a very concerned priest with students. He realized the importance of young people and their involvement in their ability to be able to see themselves as significant in the church. And in Poland the situation was different. It wasn't the United States, but he certainly wanted to make the young college students realize that they were important, for the moral life of the church, the moral life of the nation—Poland. And I was really impressed by that. Then afterwards finding out the number of languages he spoke. Most of that was just unbelievable that this man was so bright, probably the brightest...one of the brighter people in the world anyway. At the time a tremendous, tremendous amount of joy. I had seen him, like I say, before he was Pope, and then when he was Pope, I was just glad to see him again. And I had a pilgrimage to Italy and sure as heck we were able to arrange it with him on Holy Saturday for a private audience and then on Easter Sunday at the mass. And on another time I just wanted to see him again and I got in touch with his secretary Father Dziwisz, Cardinal now in Krakow, and he arranged for me to be there for a papal mass and another private audience. I think of what the Pope would have done if he were in the Our Lady of Czestochowa parish or St. Joseph's parish. He loved people. And we had that audience. I had brought him a copy of my book, *The First Easter Bunny*, and he looked, he goes: Lewandowski, that's you! I said: Ya, ya, ya! And, anyway, after he was getting ready to leave, I just started singing "sto lat" and then everybody in the group started singing "sto lat". And he heard that it started with me and he picked up his cane...he was walking with a cane...he picked up the cane and goes: Ah, Easter Bunny! Easter Bunny! That was so unbelievable. He was so personable. And, like I said, I think he was good with the college students, good with the young people, good with the old people, and I think he just had that charisma and everyone in his presence knew that. He was special. He was a wonderful man.

BRETT: 25:38 Thank you very much for that.

PRIEST L: If I'm talking too much just tell me to slow down. [laughs]

BRETT: Oh, no, no, I was ready to hear some of these amazing stories. But you did say something that I want to follow up on, actually. You were describing how the sisters at St. Mary's would say things like ...basically preparing you for discrimination, saying you would have to work twice as hard and things like that. I was just wondering if there are any personal experiences

that you experienced, or that someone you knew experienced, in which they were discriminated against or humiliated for being Polish?

PRIEST L: Well, there were students at St. Mary's...this was when I was a priest there and had to take a bus to go school... and they would be, you know: You dumb Pollock! St. Mary's fairies!... talking like that to the kids. And I don't know whether it was meant to be discriminatory or just being rude or, you know, totally classless, or whatever, but ya, there was that kind of stuff that took place. The sisters were not there too. When I was a student there, they wanted very much for their kids to do well and to get ahead. And they really pushed and encouraged as much as they could. And whether it was with the Debating Club or the Declamation Society, or the sports teams or the science fairs, they would really push us to do our best--and we performed. And we performed well. So much so that even Bishop Rueger on a number of occasions, would say that St. Mary's kids were probably the best educated Catholic school kids in the diocese because of the sisters that we had, they really encouraged them. It was almost like your own family. You know, like your own parents, aunts and uncles encouraging you to do well. When I graduated from high school in 1966, I think that there were only three or four kids who did not go on to college. And those that didn't go, either went into the military or secretarial school or nursing school. They continued on. St. Mary's was very concerned and the Sisters knew that education was the key, that you wouldn't live in poverty, at that time. If you had an education you'd be able to get ahead, you'd be able to get good employment, and you could do well, you wouldn't live in poverty. So they encouraged that. And it worked.

BRETT: 29:09 Do you think that such a push for education came from... Before World War II, especially around World War I, Polish people in the community mainly worked as laborers and factories.

PRIEST L: Yes.

BRETT: And then it was only after World War II that people started going to college because of the GI Bill, so do think that it probably came from that?

PRIEST L: I think that the people who came from Poland, the largest group, I think the initial group that came, I think it's 1890 to maybe 1915, before the war, and those people were laborers. Whether they were educated or not, they were laborers because that's what they could do. There were many people like my father, who was a very smart man, he was a brilliant man, and I think that if he had had an opportunity he would have liked to have gone to college. And I don't know why—if he had said it or what—but he wanted to be a doctor. And circumstances occurred where he was not able to go to college, but all of his kids were going to school. We were all grammar schools, high schools, it was going to be Parochial school, St. Mary's—you want to get a good education, and then there was some freedom. Not *if* you'd go to college, but what college you would go to. My father's parents were very much kind of in sync with the pastors and the sisters in school that thought that education was the key. And I think you'd see the same thing now where in poorer communities, if we're able to offer a good education to the poorer students, I think they'll make it and

they'll do well. So I think that whatever the case, whether it was because of the GI Bill—I'd have to say yes, it certainly contributed to it, certainly did—there was something underlying there too, and that was the way we were brought up. A lot of families at St. Mary's that had a number of kids, like the Koperniak or the Mirziewskis, they all went to college too. Parents have that desire for their kids to be educated and they turn out to do well.

BRETT: 31:52 Okay. Well, that's all the questions that in have specifically for you. If there is anything else that you would like to share, or just to reflect on? That's fine if not. Do you have anything else that you would want to say?

PRIEST L: Ya, I think we spoke about the sisters a lot and I think that the priests who were at St. Mary's and Our Lady of Czestochowa parish, they... We always had a number of priests there, four or five priests stationed there, and that's unheard of these days, but they were very involved in the life of the parish and the school. And they worked very well for the good of the kids. They were real proud to see the kids getting ahead. I remember Monsignor Chwalek, I mean, that guy was unbelievable. He just wanted that to be the best school, and he wanted that to be the best parish. It was kind of a nice thing to see. We kind of like didn't mind that we drove to a good school and did well. He really pushed hard to make things happen at that parish and that school. And we were very fortunate to have him Father John Szimocki, Father Chet Janczukowicz, Monsignor Naszatka, that's a another thing, poor Monsignor- not Monsignor, Father Naszatka. He was sort of blind and sort of deaf. And we used to go to confession First Friday all the time. You know, there are five or six priests hearing confessions and Father Naszatka, the deaf and blind priest, had the largest lines there, all the kids going up to *him*! Going to confessions you'd get so tired of sitting there in the confessional for so long that you'd shut both doors, go and have a cigarette, then come back in. I mean it was just amazing. It was like... And we loved him because he was human, you know. I think there was a humanity that came through with the priests as well as the sisters, I think having the same common heritage and loving our background. Everybody loved being Polish. You know, it wasn't something that—childish as it may have seemed like, it wasn't so good, but to us, we were proud of who we were. And I think that contributed to that sense of pride that many of us even feel now. When I look at my nephews and nieces they still love the customs of Christmas and Easter. Do you still partake in those customs?

BRETT: 34:45 Yes.

PRIEST L: Breaking of the wafer on Easter? We still do that and they look forward to it and the family's gotten so large that we have a couple of Christmas Eve dinners and they all get the Oplatek and they all share that and the święconka on Easter Sunday. And I think it's good because it keeps a greater sense of pride. Knowing the customs, knowing life from where we came, that's an important thing, you know, traditions. And faith with the traditions, I think, are very significant.

BRETT: 35:16 Well, all right, thank you very much, and I appreciate you taking time out ...

PRIEST L: I really appreciate this too. I think it's going to be good. Now, is this going to be a written paper that you're doing?