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## Oral History: Charlene Zimkiewicz

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## Interview with Charlene Zimkiewicz

BRETT: Today is Friday, July 7, 2017. My name is Brett Cotter and I consent to having my voice on this recording. I'm here with Charlene Zimkiewicz. Do you consent to have your voice on this recording?

CHARLENE: Yes I do.

BRETT: All right. So why don't we start with you telling about the most basic details of your early life in Worcester's Polish community.

CHARLENE: All my grandparents came from Poland, so I would be second generation. Both of my parents, Helen and Charles, were born in Worcester. And their parents came to Worcester and then they remained here all the time. And, let's see... I believe that I was told that the grandparents helped in the formation of Czestochowa Church, and they were very early on, in the early 1900s, when the parish first started. But my grandparents, I didn't know that well on my mother's side, and then on my father's side, they died when I was in high school. They just were church communicants but not that active, whereas my parents, later on, because we were in school, they were involved in the Booster's at church, which is a men's organization and my mother was the president of the Women's Guild three times over and was very active in the societies in the church that way. But somehow my parents decided that we should go to St. Mary's school, so that was our main focus. We were insolated in a sense that there were so many different ethnic communities in Worcester at the time so that the Polish kids went to St. Mary's, if you were Irish you may have gone to Ascension or St. Stephen's, so we really didn't, you know, have too much communication with those kids. I did, in a sense, because I went to the girl's clubs so you met all kinds of people. But as far as St. Mary's was concerned, it was a really nice, tight community, I mean a whole lot of space for school and church from the late fifties even up until, you know... Because I remember when we graduated St. Mary's in 1970, it was like a big deal. We were going to Worcester State College where there was going to be all kinds of people, you know? You really didn't interact with Protestants or people of color, different races... But we were getting ready for that. That was just for that basic question.

BRETT: 02:53 What did your parents do for a living?

CHARLENE: My mother worked during the war in a factory and then she worked in Denholm's until I was born. And my father, both parents, mother and father, supported their widowed mothers and so they didn't get married until everything was kind of settled after World War II. But my father worked in the wire mill and then decided that he would become a policeman. He wanted a job with security, and the story as I was told was that he was like the second Polish police officer for the city. Now that may or may not be true but there weren't that many back in 1945. And I do know that his ability to speak Polish came in handy because so few people could on the force and he helped translate a lot. So that's what they did. And then Mom stayed home with us later.

- BRETT: 03:53 Okay. When you were growing up, are there any memories of festivals or celebrations that focused on Polish heritage, you know, things like from the May Day celebrations to... what have you...? Do you have any memories of stuff like that?
- CHARLENE: In the home we did the Christmas Eve Wigilia, that was a big family affair. And I remember my favorite one was when my mother's whole family got together and we walked, because usually we'd just do it here, but we walked in the snow covered streets all the way over to the other side of Vernon Street to have the whole family get together, like twenty five people. Because there was only the four of us here. I remember that vividly. So Christmas was a big holiday, and Easter and always church was involved. And, ya, May Day was the coronation of the Blessed Mother. I mean, that was big for us girls. We always wore our communion veils and then we were Children of Mary. That whole church parking lot, St. Mary's parking lot, was full of people, standing. Not cars—people standing. And we had to go on a Sunday and by grades, stand in line and sing and they crowned the statue of the Blessed Mother outside. And don't forget bringing the Easter basket. Bringing your eggs and a piece of kielbasa and salt and bread to be blessed, the Świąconka, we'd bring that to church and people we would walk with it. I can remember being really proud, and this is quite a distance. Where we live here isn't exactly right on Vernon Hill so to walk all the way down the hill with an Easter basket to get blessed, that was kind of a big deal.
- BRETT: 05:42 So are there any memories of challenges that you either personally or as a family or as a community faced?
- CHARLENE: The only thing that I can sort of remember is that, again, getting back to the ethnicity, that somehow in my mind, that it was tough to be Polish, to be like a government. It was slow to come because we were like the newcomers, so everything seemed to be with the Irish people, the Irish community had made their way up into the echelons of government, even in the police department. So, I know that my father had a little bit of prejudice there and I can remember once he said that: Well, you, um , don't have children so you, Mr. Polish, you can work on the holidays and the weekends.—you know? But he overcame that, he wasn't afraid, you know, but there was a little bit of that. So I mean kind of growing up I always thought well, like, the Irish were on top of everything in Worcester. They had the jobs, you know? So there was that little bit of feeling, but again, like I said, because I went to the girls' clubs I met a lot of people so I didn't really feel that prejudice,
- BRETT: 06:59 Okay. Worcester's always been that kind of community that has had all those ethnic communities like you said.
- CHARLENE: Right.
- BRETT: So were there any kind of tensions between—like you just said that there were some type of tensions—but at a community level, where there any major kind of tensions do you think?

- CHARLENE: No. Like today we have gangs, but I didn't feel any of that growing up, I didn't think there was. I mean, people kind of stuck together.
- BRETT: 07:30 Okay, awesome. Kind of switching topics and this is long before you guys were here, but in 1959 there were fires down in St. Mary's, and part of what was remarkable about that was the community's response to rebuilding after that. Do you remember any stories about the community's response to these fires?
- CHARLENE: I was in the second grade and —this sounds awful, but—they sent us to school and told us to get some books, and we were thrilled that we had a day off. I mean I guess we knew that the building was safe. It, you know, didn't burn down. But we got the day off for something like that so it left us kind of giddy. As a seven year old if you don't have to go to school that's okay. But now I look at the pictures in the books and man they worked hard. And having had a first-hand experience with a fire—my husband owned some property, and seeing what fire can do, now I realize that that was horrific damage. But I don't know if you know the story about this picture of the beautiful Blessed Mother at St. Mary's school. And because I taught there for nineteen years, I would see this picture. It's oh, maybe four feet by three feet and I still get goose bumps. It did not get damaged. And there's a little card down at the bottom of the picture that says: *During the fire of 1959, this was the sole thing that didn't get damaged.* Because it was in that kitchen area. And I used to see that picture all the time and it used to be on a wall upstairs and I'm not sure it's by the front door, but it has a place of honor in school but, as I grew older, I would walk by that picture and say: Wow that's really something. But, ya, they got the school cleaned up pretty quickly. I mean, it seemed like it didn't affect us educationally, I guess we must have gone back to school pretty quickly.
- BRETT: 9:42 Okay. This is also kind of switching topics, but so I-290 was finished in 1960. Again, this was just after the fire so...
- CHARLENE: Right.
- BRETT: And traditionally, that's kind of been how this was something that carved the Polish community of Worcester in two. Were there any clear superficial affects that you could tell, of how that whole construction project affected the Polish community?
- CHARLENE: I have to say no. Only because again this—we're about what, 2/10 of a mile up the street so that... You know, we... My personal experience was that I was involved in school, in church, but once we came home here it wasn't... and I mean, I would go to my friends' homes, we would walk to Water Street, walk to Millbury Street, but it just wasn't like my whole world was shattered when 290 went in. The kids that lived on the other side of 290 still came to Saint Mary's. They walked to school. So in my experience, it didn't really splinter or divide the community. But maybe that's because I was only eight years old so I don't have much remembrance of actually walking, say, from Church to Millbury Street a lot easier. What it is now is what I remember growing up, so it didn't

really affect me. I do know that I always thought that we got the cellar in the church as a result of 290 coming through. So as a child, I thought that the whole thing was for evacuation purposes, or something, I don't know, because this was still during the Cold War. We actually used to do air raid drills at Saint Mary's School back in the late 50s, 60s really, hiding under desks and things.

BRETT: So did you know anyone who lived on the other side of 290 personally?

CHARLENE: Yeah, one—two girls that I knew. They still came to school and I would go to their house and, you know, there was no effect to our relationship.

BRETT: 12:07 Awesome. I'm switching topics again... you mentioned earlier that your parents were involved with some organizations within the community, like the Booster's Club, etc. There were lots of organizations like the PNI (Polish Naturalization and Independence) Club, and that's just one example. If you could maybe talk about how those or other organizations affected you or what your impression of them was, would you like to share?

CHARLENE: Sure. Actually if it wasn't for the White Eagle Club, I might not be here, because my mother graduated from high school in 1939 and they had some kind of a dance for the Polish graduates at the White Eagle Club. And my father was a weight lifter at the time, and her brother was a weight lifter, and they used to go to the Polish Club and my mother needed a ride home and Uncle Stanley said, "He's OK." Oh, I forgot about that, he [my father] was also very involved in the White Eagle, and he had been president down there. So the clubs were big. We went to the PNI once in a while, oh, they had picnics. They used to have a picnic out in Millbury with pony rides-- that was a big thing. So there was a lot of outside things that went on. And then at one point, when my father was president, back in the late 60s, early 70s, they used to have dinners at the White Eagle and my mother used to do the cooking here and my father would bring it down there and they'd sell the cabbage and the kielbasi and all that stuff. So times were different, they had different entertainments, everybody wasn't running quite so much.

When you think about it now, there was more focus on sticking with your community versus running here, there or... Even us growing up, there weren't organized soccer teams and things like that, so school basketball, school baseball was a little bit more important. Basketball was a huge thing, and that was city-wide, that went above and beyond, because Worcester was a basketball town and all the high schools... That's off-topic but... [laughs].

BRETT: 14:32 No, that's very important for the Polish community; I mean, I forget exactly what year it was, but the last year that they had the New England Basketball Championship, Saint Mary's won it and it was a huge deal.

CHARLENE: I was in the seventh grade and they let us go on the bus! They wanted all of us there, that was a very big deal. And my father was a class mate of a lot of those kids- my father grew up with their fathers. Anthony and I—my parents were older when they had us so some of my father's

classmates that he went to Saint Mary's with, their kids were already in high school while I was still in grammar school. But that was a very big deal, the New England Championship, I remember sitting on the bus and going there and being excited about it, it was fun.

BRETT: 15:26 At those games, what did people do that kind of indicated that they were Polish? I mean that's a pretty open-ended question but did they sing Polish songs or things like that in the audience?

CHARLENE: No, I think it was just more pride in Saint Mary's. Because actually, my Polish is very poor, because the theory was back when you were first generation—my father—he was fluent but they were trying to assimilate so well that they really didn't encourage us to be bilingual whereas now as I'm a teacher I see everybody wants their kid to keep both languages and it is possible and it is very good. The kids can do it. So you have kids who are fluent in both Vietnamese and English by the time they come to kindergarten, or Albanian. Those languages are really hard for me... So we didn't speak a lot of Polish in the home, which is sad. So everything was conducted in English mostly.

BRETT: 16:37 There was also some people who came from Poland who spoke fluent Polish. Did you sense anything, like a rift, between Polish people born in America and Polish people born in Poland?

CHARLENE: There was a little bit. It's sad to say but I think we thought, maybe because we were here longer, we got the feeling that we were a little bit better than they were. That sounds terribly un-Christian. You know, that they were outsiders. I don't remember the nuns talking that much Polish to these kids and, I don't know, they were trying probably so hard to learn English that we didn't really ask them, "Could you teach us Polish?" I think it'd be different now, I'm sorry to say. But I do remember there was one girl that came when we were in the fifth grade, and it's funny because she just called me now to, you know, get back in touch after all these years and I had gone to her house. I remember coming home, because they were poor, they had one pot on the stove and just one bed and I remember coming home saying "Wow". They worked hard, they ended up buying their own home and I think her brother went to Holy Cross. They were really working hard to get going. But now I'm jealous of their Polish. When I hear people from Poland now, I just love to hear the language, and I say "Oh I wish I could speak it", speak it at all, in full sentences.

BRETT: 18:28 So when you graduated from Saint Mary's, did you go to college after that?

CHARLENE: Yeah, I went to public education, Worcester State, it was Worcester State College then.

BRETT: So you lived close to home.

CHARLENE: Yes.

BRETT: Ok, so was that a difficult transition for you, being in an all-Polish school going to a public college?

CHARLENE: No, because there were a few of us so we kind of stuck together. There were three or four of us that were going into education so we went and we

registered together and as time went on, you know, everyone went their own ways, because this one was in communications, this one was in secondary ed. But I think we did alright. And it came down to—we had a couple of good professors that acknowledged that we had good training in the past so that helped out. We were prepared well.

BRETT: 19:27 Where did you go to teach after college?

CHARLENE: I subbed for a year in 1974 or 75 because I couldn't get a job. That was right around Proposition 2 ½ and there were no jobs to be had. So I remember I kept a log, I was in about fifteen to twenty different schools, they used to call you every night. And what happened is that my father died very suddenly, and Monsignor Chwalek, he said "You need a job, I need a teacher," so I ended up going back to Saint Mary's, which wasn't part of the plan. I was going to be a public school teacher so it took thirty five years to get there [laughs]. But I enjoyed being in Catholic school, right back at Saint Mary's, it was at the time of Welcome Back, Kotter, that TV show that was on. I went back to my old stomping ground.

BRETT: 20:24 So it's rather widely known that today there are fewer Poles living around Our Lady of Czestochowa in the immediate vicinity as there once were. Can you recall anybody who moved into the neighborhood who was not of Polish heritage after the 1970s?

CHARLENE: Personally, I didn't know anybody even though I was teaching at the school. I would acknowledge the neighbors and say hello, but no, I didn't know anybody that moved in. Some of my friends' families kind of still stayed, but... the parents stayed, the kids moved on... and now the neighborhood totally changed, I mean it's everybody there. At that the beginning we all would walk to church and everybody walked to school, so of course with them moving to their own homes, that all changed with moving to the suburbs. It's amazing when you actually do think about it, that the church has survived and thrived and I think it got a good resurgence when new people came in, new immigrants, and they're the ones that are keeping the church going now because a lot of people my age don't go to this church, or even my mother's age or father's age, they've passed away. But, it's a nice blend, you know, that the church is still vibrant.

BRETT: 22:02 What kind of immigrants, Polish immigrants?

CHARLENE: Polish immigrants. Ya, there's a whole new group of people and their kids and they're joining the church. And there are also a lot of people that are not of Polish background that I see in church now too. You know I see Vietnamese people at our church, some black people. So it's really exciting. I mean a church should be universal. It's really nice.

BRETT: So, when do you think that change occurred?

CHARLENE: I would say within, since about maybe 2000, about twenty years already. You know, more people from Holden came and probably after around Marshall Law, '89, '90, maybe there was an influx too. The only thing that I think is kind of sad for me having taught in the Catholic school is that people come, they go to church, they do CDD, but they don't send

their kids to St. Mary's. Again, if they're living out of town fine, but it would be nice to have the school be a little bit more full as it could accommodate a lot more people. But there is still a lot more good Polish to be heard.

23:24 As part of growing up at St. Mary's school, the community was so big that we had this thing called a June Show. And there were two grades of everything, there was a Grade 1-1, Grade 1-2, so by the times you got to eight grade there were sixteen classes. Everybody put on this little skit, complete with dances and costumes. We used to send away for the costumes. In the seventh grade my mother helped make skirts for all the girls and we did Tea for Two. But in 1959 or so Monsignor was twenty-nine years a priest. We had pink dresses with silver flock and it was a huge to-do. Your parents would come and sit, that whole auditorium was full. Ninety degrees sitting on wooded chairs to watch your child sing on stairs and sing on stage. We even used to use the secret entryway from over the gym to go back upstairs so you could enter onto the stage. They paid a maybe a dollar a ticket but, yet again, everybody's family was involved and they just went to it. They know they had to suffer through it sitting on those chairs, and they did it, but it was a really big affair—June Show.