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## Oral History: John Kraska

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## Interview with John Kraska

- BRETT: Today is June 27, 2017 and I am here with Mr. John Kraska and I consent to conducting this interview, and Mr. Kraska, do you consent to having your voice on this interview?
- JOHN: I do consent to that.
- BRETT: Okay. So, why don't we start by you telling us about some of the most basic details of your early life?
- JOHN: I was born in Fall River Massachusetts, but my parents moved to Worcester before I was a year old and I've lived in Worcester ever since. My early years, my formative years, I can remember at times we lived in a three-decker, and my mother's mother lived on the second floor and when my mother had things to do my sister and I would go upstairs to Babcia. Until I was probably four and a half years old I probably didn't speak hardly any English. And prior to entering kindergarten, we had a crash course in English that summer to make me more compatible with the other students. But other than that I attended St. Mary's kindergarten, grammar school, and high school, graduating from high school when in 1964.
- BRETT: 01:27 What did your parents do for a living?
- JOHN: My dad initially, when he came to Worcester, was a sign painter, and then he worked for Donnelly Advertising, and then, probably about when I was four or five years old he ventured into a gas station at what is now Posner Square. There used to be an Esso Gas Station there that he ran for a couple of years, and then decided that there was a market for, what we would nowadays call Hot Shot Delivery Service, for auto parts because prior to that if you were a small entity, you'd have to go pick up the parts when you needed them or you would get one delivery a day. And he thought that was unfair to the small businesses, small garages like he was, so he started a business back then and it's flourished.
- BRETT: 02:32 Recalling your childhood, are there any memories of festivities and celebrations and so forth that focused on Polish heritage and ethnicity, etc.?
- JOHN: Absolutely. I mean the holidays were special whether it be Christmas, or Easter, in particular, on Christmas Eve I believe at that time there we would fast from noontime on in that house, which also was the case with Holy Saturday, right before Easter. And back in those days there were only masses on Sundays so there were no Saturday vigils. And you would not have breakfast before you received communion so you strived to go for the eight o'clock mass at church rather than the ten o'clock mass because your stomach was craving for food by that time. But, you know, there was always Polish music in the house. My dad's parents lived in Fall River where I was born. And every other week, or every third week, we would take a trip down to visit my grandparents, who were also, both of them came from Poland as did grandparents on my mother's side. So I'm a blueblood Polish person. I remember, you know, in grammar school, doing all the prayers in Polish and singing Polish Christmas carols and

Easter hymns belonging to the choir. You know, when they had festivities my sister would dress up in costumes and...

BRETT: 04:31 What kind of costumes?

JOHN: Like, ah, I believe the Polish word is *krakowianka*, you know, full skirt, you know, with the vest. It's in the book, there are some pictures of some people dressed up in costumes.

BRETT: 04:52 Right, ya, *krakowianka*. I forget exactly, but...

JOHN: "Krkowianka" would mean a woman that grew up in the vicinity of Krakow.

BRETT: 5:03 Okay. Would that have peasant affiliations or city affiliations or something like both? Would it be somebody that grew up around Krakow?

JOHN: Well I mean...

BRETT: It's just Polish?

JOHN: It's just Polish. You know, maybe those costumes originated from that particular area, I mean, there have been Polish groups that have come to Worcester. Most recently, there was the *mazowsze* that played at Hanover Theater, maybe about two or four years ago. And they have a series of dances from different parts of Poland and they have different costumes from different parts of Poland.

BRETT: 05:44 Awesome. [Are there] any memories that come to mind of challenges that you faced either personally, or as a family or as a community, or any tensions that you could sense in the community?

JOHN: No, I didn't see any tensions at all at that time. You know, a lot was centered right around the church and they treated the pastor of the church almost as a god; what he says, you obeyed it. And, you know, things are a lot more flexible in this country nowadays. I don't know if that's for the better or what have you, but you see kids that grow up nowadays—and this is just my own personal observation—they have more independence, and as a result don't follow the strict moral standards that I grew up with.

BRETT: 07:01 Would you mind relating details specifically about what moral guidelines that you kind of went by as a child and as a young man?

JOHN: When you were going to school and you were taught by the sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, at that time there, anyone who went to public school was not as good as people who went to Parochial schools. We were kind of sheltered. I know when I was applying to WPI at the time, you know, one of the nuns says—and mind you now, this is already in the early 60s—Well isn't there a Catholic school that offers the same thing? No this is where I want to go! But that's the way that we were... it came on us like blinders... And that's the independence that I talk about nowadays. Is it better? I don't know. There's definitely in this world, not just with Polish people, you know... your generation speaks out more about their feelings whereas we kind of kept those thought to ourselves.

BRETT: 08:15 I see. Do you remember anything about the fires that damaged St. Mary's in 1959?

JOHN: I do remember that there was a fire and it went up in the staircase abutting the auditorium and we didn't have school for probably a week or

something like that, but I don't have too much recollection of that at all, you know, outside of that it happened.

BRETT: 08:48 Okay. What about the community's response to it? You know, there were a lot of people, of course, who got together and fixed the school. But other than the fact that it was united, you don't really remember anything on this?

JOHN: No, really I don't. At that time what was I, in eighth grade?

BRETT: 09:09 Let's go onto another topic, on to I-290. So I-290, of course, when it was constructed, it ran right through the Polish community, the heart of the Worcester's Polish community and it was finished in 1960. Besides the fact that it geographically cut through that area, were there any other affects that you can remember from before and then after that change in the community?

JOHN: Yup. Well, you know, people were becoming more and more mobile at that time there. In the early 50s, to have one automobile per family and sometimes per three-decker, was not unheard of, and when my mother would do grocery shopping it would be nothing to walk from Vernon Street all the way down to Millbury Street and you did your shopping at the various markets over there, and walked back up. When expressway I-290 came through—we referred to it as the expressway—it hindered that. But by that time there, it was not unheard of to have two cars in a family, you know, and parking became a real situation on Vernon Hill. But everyone adjusted to it. You know, no one likes change but this is for the better and especially in my dad's business—I mean, it took forever to get cross town to deliver something to, let's say, Lincoln Street. Whereas when the expressway came through, you know, a twenty-minute drive now became a six or seven minute drive and it facilitated moving merchandise a lot quicker.

BRETT: 11:04 There were people who lived on the other side of the expressway if you're on the side that St. Mary's is on today.

JOHN: Ya.

BRETT: 11:13 Did those people, from what you could tell, feel, or were they separated more from the community...from the rest of the community?

JOHN: I don't think so. But, you know, you're absolutely right. You're talking about, as they called it, the Green Island section down on Kelley Square. You know, the young people that lived on Meade Street, Lodi Street, or Lamartine Street, or Endicott Street... I didn't sense that there was any [John brings attention to a rainbow in the window].

BRETT: 11:52 So, I was looking through your records at St. Mary's and I found your name-- and I noticed that you were awarded the Declamation Award when you graduated in 1964. What does that actually mean?

JOHN: Back in my years in high school, every year there, there was a Diocesan-wide competition whereas it started off within the school and most students would prepare a speech, not written by themselves, but something that someone else wrote. And then you would commit that speech to memory and then you would just pretend that you were that person giving

that speech. You know, some people used, at that time there, Kennedy's inaugural address speech. You know, I used...it was something from the Irish—I don't think I can remember—but what it was...and then from the school they declared a winner in maybe each grade category, and then you went on to a series of several other competitions. You know, the finals took place at St. John's High School. I was competing against two other boys, one of which won the competition the year before, and I just happened to be, you know, I guess everyone liked the way I presented my speech. That's what the Declamation was.

BRETT: 13:45 Okay.

JOHN: It was just public speaking basically, or you know, how you could project a thought.

BRETT: Okay. Did you take any classes in Polish studies? Of course, you probably wouldn't have taken any in Polish language because you already spoke the language.

JOHN: Well, it was compulsory.

BRETT: It was compulsory...

JOHN: It was compulsory through my freshman and maybe even sophomore year, ya, you had to take Polish in school.

BRETT: Okay.

JOHN: But most kids knew stuff of Polish. It's not like it was foreign to them at that time there because everyone grew up with Polish grandparents.

BRETT: 14:24 Okay.

JOHN: That was the society, you know? And so you spoke Polish and it wasn't difficult to kick it up.

BRETT: 14:36 But they stopped making it compulsory.

JOHN: That is correct, you did not have to take Polish in your junior or senior year in high school.

BRETT: 14:42 Oh, okay, was that for everybody, that didn't have to take it if you were in junior or senior year, or was it just ...?

JOHN: Yes, okay. It wasn't even offered at that time because they figured you needed other courses to get into college.

BRETT: 14:58 So, there are many organizations that have been active in Worcester that are centered on Polish heritage such as, or Polish authenticity, such as the PNI and the Polish Nationalization Independent Club, or the White Eagle Club, etc., and were you part of any organizations like that or were you affected by any of them? Of course, you must have been affected, but if you could reflect on that, perhaps?

JOHN: I have been president of the Quo Vadis Club which offers a scholarship to a student every year, and I have not been a member of either the PNI Club or the White Eagle Club, yet I have attended functions at both clubs and the Quo Vadis Club has their annual Christmas party every year at the PNI Club. We have a live orchestra and we still maintain—and this is usually the first week in December—we still maintain the sharing of the Christmas Wafer, which is called an oplatek—it almost looks like a host but it's in a sheet maybe about three inches by five inches, and we break it

up into sections. Sheer camaraderie at that rate... We sing a few Polish Christmas carols and a *Kolędy* and a couple of English carols and keep some of those Polish traditions alive still today.

BRETT: 16:32 Okay. What were your impressions of the organizations besides the Quo Vadis Club, just, you know, in general?

JOHN: Couldn't spread myself thin enough to belong to all of them. [laughs]

BRETT: 16:53 What kind of celebrations did the community kind of come to [celebrate] besides, you know, mass and stuff like that? Were there any celebrations that were purely focused on Polish rather than Catholic heritage?

JOHN: With regards to mass, yes there was a May celebration that they had a crowning of the Blessed Virgin Mary and they went from the four altars in the church. But getting to answer your question, there wasn't anything that was done to my knowledge outside of the fact that when, in my senior year, the basketball team reached the Brass Ring and won the last New England basketball championship that ever existed in '64, and the city came together and had a nice celebration for all of us ballplayers and team members at the Worcester auditorium, and, you know, we received gifts from the city of Worcester. There was, in my three years or four years at St. Mary's, there was a parade every year and that's in the book [The Polish Community of Worcester, co-authored by John] and I'm trying to remember what the theme of the parade was about but... We presented a float, you know, with the ballplayers and the cheer leaders, and what have you. We started it at Lincoln Square and moved on just past City Hall. And that ran for three or four years and we would have a drill team. That's not church technically related, but it was a community parade, it wasn't just for Polish.

BRETT: 19:00 Kind of wrapping up, but it's widely known that today there are fewer Poles living around in the immediate vicinity of Our Lady of Czestochowa than there once were. Can you recall personally anybody who moved into the neighborhood that was not of Polish heritage while you were living in the community?

JOHN: Well, it's almost like you had different sections. I mean, Our Lady of Vilna, which I pointed out as we were coming into this room, was the Lithuanian section of Vernon Hill. You had a synagogue on Providence Street just beyond St. Casimir's Church, which was also a Lithuanian church. So part of Providence Street and part of lower Sterling Street was Lithuanian. And then you had Ascension Church and school on Vernon Street, just before the expressway. And that was for Irish girls and the church serviced the Irish community and St. Mary's, but back in, let's say a hundred years ago, you know, a lot of the immigrants that came over here had trades or skills, and granted their lives centered around the church, but they walked, they didn't have cars back then so everyone congregated within a certain area. You know, you didn't have Poles over on the other side of the city, you had Poles just in this area because they had to walk to church, they had to walk to work, they walked to the

market. That's why everything was located specifically within a certain geographical area of Worcester. And, you know, right across the street from me was Chief Hanlon who was Irish and his whole three-decker was all Irish. Next to him there was McMahon and McMaster and that was Scottish, and then we had the Shays at the top of the hill, you know, and the Donahue's next to us. But we were Polish and the people next to us were Polish and three more houses down Hillside Street were all Polish. What did we know? We played together and it's not like we didn't associate with people of different ethnicities.

BRETT: 21:35 Okay. Was there much of a rift, if you will, between Polish people who were born in Poland and Polish people who were not born in Poland, like Polish-Americans, that you could sense?

JOHN: Never sensed it at all. I mean, we had immigrants in my class that... one girl in particular, her parents had passed away and she came to live in Worcester with her aunt and uncle and she entered into St. Mary's probably in the fifth or sixth grade. We welcomed her, you know? She went right around, you know, right through high school, assimilated with us. Was there...? I'm trying to think... There was a term that they used for some of the later immigrants and they called them DPs. I took kind of offense to that. I think that the word stood for *displaced persons*. And maybe there was a little friction between some factors of our church or our community and those people that came over but I didn't sense it. I knew that there was a little bit of ... you know, between certain people, but you're going to find that out almost anywhere. But we were never taught that.

BRETT: Right, Okay. Well, thank you very much. That's all the questions I have for you today. If there are any last reflections on Polish-ness as far as the Polish community, you can go ahead and...

JOHN: No, I mean if you want you shut it off, what are your feelings, what do you do now to keep the Polish culture alive?