



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

FIELDNOTES

Fieldworker(s) [(Initials) Name]: (KK) Kate Kruckemeyer, ()

Accession Numbers:

KK-01-02-FN

Fieldnotes

- - -C

Audio recordings

- - -CS

Photographic documentation

KK-01-02-M

Additional materials

Initial Contact: 5/18/2001 Contact Date: 5/21/2001

Related Accession Numbers: - - - - -

Individual/Group/Event: Alexander Zielinski

Address: [REDACTED]

City: [REDACTED] Zip: [REDACTED] County: [REDACTED]

Phone: Daytime: [REDACTED] Evening: same

E-mail: _____ Website: _____

Contact person: _____

Title: _____

Location of Interview: meeting of the Society of Polish American Culture

Street Address: Chicopee Elks Club, Granby Road (see below for their mailing address)

City: Chicopee Zip: 01014 County: Hampden

Special Needs (including translation): _____

Traditions documented on visit (traditional art/skills, occupational experience, ethnic or religious community): Mr. Zielinski is an all-around expert on Polish folk and fine arts; we spoke about his own wycinanki (paper cutting), Easter egg decoration (pysanki and other types of decoration), szopka (nativity creche and plays), and Polish folk and choral singing (he directs his church chorus as well as leading the singing for the Society of Polish American Culture); he has given slide lectures to many groups (including doing teacher training) on both folk and fine arts

Traditions noted for follow-up: all of above could be documented in more depth; in particular I think it would be good to see the Christmas festivities which include the szopki, and will call Mr. Zielinski in the Fall to see if such an event is being planned

Other Possible Contacts: see attached

Summary Description: see attached

Alexander Zielinski

[REDACTED]

Stas Radosz recommended Mr. Zielinski, who is in his 60s (or so) and does wycinanki. Sophia Bilides' report also says that he has researched and built his own *szopka* (nativity scene which includes landmark Polish buildings). Father Charles recommended Mr. Zielinski as someone carrying on the tradition of making *szopka*, a Polish nativity scene. The *szopka* Mr. Zielinski makes range from very small to quite large. The *szopka* are sometimes used for puppet plays at Christmas. Mr. Zielinski is a member of Our Lady of the Rosary parish in Springfield. Father Charles says this parish has a higher number of recent immigrants (although Mr. Zielinski was born in the U.S.) and might have others today who are carrying on craft traditions.

Background to the visit:

Stas Radosz recommended Mr. Zielinski to me for his *wycinanki*. Father Charles DiMascola recommended him for his *szopka* (nativity scene which includes landmark Polish buildings). He had also been suggested as a contact by Sophia Bilides in her Smithsonian fieldwork report, although was not followed up with at that time. I spoke with Mr. Zielinski by phone on 5/18/2001 and we arranged to meet each other at this evening's meeting of the Society of Polish American Culture.

Mr. Zielinski was unable to spend more than a brief time with me because he is currently the primary caregiver for his mother, who is in her 90s and ailing. He described the Society meeting as his 'one evening out' during the month. He would be happy to talk with us in greater depth, but currently his schedule does not allow it.

We were able to speak off and on during the Society meeting, and for about 20 minutes afterward. Obviously, I was not able to see Mr. Zielinski's work, but given his depth and breadth of knowledge, and numerous recommendations of him by other cultural specialists, I feel confident in recommending him highly. A follow-up visit would be useful if and when his schedule becomes more flexible. We discussed the possibility of meeting again closer to Christmas, particularly if he or the society is putting on a presentation of the nativity.

Alexander Zielinski:

Mr. Zielinski, "Alex" or "Alexander" to his friends, is a semi-retired second-generation Polish American with extensive knowledge of Polish and Polish American folk and fine arts. For 35 years he taught art in the lower Pioneer Valley; he taught art directly at the elementary and junior high level (at Myrtle Street School in Indian Orchard and at the John F. Kennedy Middle School) and also worked as a teacher-trainer at American International College, including teaching special education teachers to use art in the classroom. He has also given many lectures around the area to interested social and cultural organizations about various art forms, including Polish folk and fine arts and the arts of other countries in Eastern Europe. Many of these lectures are slide lectures, and some have been demonstrations. He continues to teach part-time in various capacities.

Mr. Zielinski was born in this area, although his parents both came from Poland. He grew up deeply invested in Polish American culture and in the Catholic Church. He met his wife Barbara in Poland, where she was a teacher and school administrator. She returned with him to the States where they raised a family. I believe he said that they have 9 grandchildren; I would guess he's in his mid-sixties. He said that the Polish American community here includes people from many regions of Poland, including Krakow, Lublin, and Bialystok. Immigration to this area represents a number of regions, eras, and motivations. For instance, his own godmother came to the U.S. at age 13 to avoid W.W.I. This area is attractive to Poles geographically and climatically, he thinks, because it is very similar to Poland. Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont are perhaps even more similar, he says.

Mr. Zielinski practices both folk and fine arts. Among other things he mentioned doing sculpture and oil painting. In the realm of folk arts, he does *wycinanki* (cut paper), although recently carpal tunnel disease has made this craft difficult for him. He said he really loves to do it, but it is obviously difficult for him now. Many years ago a master *wycinanki* artist came to the area from Poland, and he learned how to do paper cutting from her, and helped her market her art locally. When she returned to Poland he continued on his own.

He also does a variety of types of Polish Easter eggs. When I said "Oh, *pysanki*," he pointed out that *pysanki*, a wax resist process, is only one of about 5 or 6 types of Slavic Easter egg decoration. There are a number of styles, most of which he has done, including not only *pysanki* but also eggs painted with oil or watercolor, sgraffito-type eggs (painted/dyed and then color is removed by inscribing the surface), and eggs which have rush or swampgrass applied to them in patterns. Not only can these processes vary in popularity from region to region, but the design styles (e.g. flower or geometric) vary by region as well.

I was particularly interested in the *szopka* he built. [*szopka* ("shuhp-kah") is singular, *szopki* ("shuhp-key") is plural] The *szopka* is a three dimensional nativity scene, like a creche. Historically, the *szopka* was part of a larger Christmas celebration, which included caroling and visiting among houses, sometimes in costume [it sounds to me much like Christmas mumming; I have read elsewhere that the *szopka* was sometimes carried from house to house by the carolers]. Traditionally, people would dress up and go caroling, and householders would reward carolers with treats. The caroling procession was often led by a person carrying a 6 or 8 pointed star on a pole, which was lit with candles. Under the feudal system in Poland, this was often a time when the lord of the area would invite the peasants to his mansion and entertain them. The *szopka* seems to refer both to the constructed nativity scene and more generally to performances of the Christmas story which were put on in or near the nativity scene, although I may have this second part wrong. The performance is most often done by children, and centers on the story of the birth of Christ, but can also involve political satire (Stalin comes in for some abuse here!). Among the characters mentioned were the Devil, angels, King Herod, and a character named "Turon," who is a semi-scary animal who delights the children. Mr. Zielinski mentioned both people as actors as well as the use of marionettes (I'm not sure which predominates, or whether this is a regional variation--Father DiMascola described the *szopka* as the setting for a puppet play).

Mr. Zielinski has constructed his own *szopka*, which he described as being large, about 5 feet long and 4 feet tall or so [Father DiMascola says Mr. Zielinski has made others, both large and small, although we did not talk about this]. His *szopka* includes both buildings and the figures for the nativity scene. It is built primarily of wood and cardboard. He described individually applying the paint for the bricks of the building with an eraser. The main building of his *szopka* is the *Sukiennice*, the "Clothiers' Hall," which is a composite representation of actual buildings in Krakow. He mentioned two major styles of *szopki*, the "Gorali" style, representing the mountain setting in the Polish mountains, and the "Krakowiac" style, which his is. Apparently others might build *szopki* with

buildings from their own home region. Mr. Zielinski typically displays his *szopka* at Christmas, although he did not this past year because his mother had just taken ill.

The *szopka* tradition is carried on in the Pioneer Valley region primarily through schools. The Society did an exhibit about 8 years ago at the Springfield Museums (specifically I believe at the Natural History museum) in which one room was filled with various *szopki*, another displayed costumes from the various regions in Poland, and another room was decorated like a traditional Polish home at Christmas. He said that a group in Enfield, Connecticut, sponsored by Asnuntuck College, puts on a contest for *szopki* and a nativity show each Christmas. The Jeronczyks (see below) also mentioned a "Szopka Festival" in Hartford, Connecticut at the Hartford Polish Home on the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend which features *szopki* made by children, a pageant, and food.

Mr. Zielinski is also a singer; he is a choir director at his church (Our Lady of the Rosary in Springfield) and often leads the singing at the meetings of the Society, as he did today. Although he had a bad case of allergies, his singing voice is quite nice.

For Follow-up:

Mr. Zielinski is a member of Our Lady of the Rosary parish in Springfield. Father Charles says this parish has a higher number of recent immigrants (although Mr. Zielinski was born in the U.S.) and might have others today who are carrying on craft traditions.


He mentioned another craft tradition which he referred to as "the Polish porcupine." This is a multi-pointed star decoration which is made out of paper, foil, or tissue paper and used as a decoration at Christmas. He did not know of anyone making those here.

I hope to be able to see Mr. Zielinski's *szopka* around the Christmas season and will follow up with him in November.

Report on the meeting of the Society of Polish American Culture:

Mailing address for the Society is:
P.O. Box 166
Chicopee, MA 01014

The President of the Society (for the last 17 years!) is:


I spoke with her briefly and gave her my card. I will send her some information about LCC grants, as Dyan Wiley indicated that the Chicopee LCC is often looking for good applicants.

The Society of Polish American Culture is a social and cultural organization based in Chicopee which serves the Polish American community of the Pioneer Valley. The Society highlights Polish culture but also includes topics on other Slavic cultures as well.

Aside from the Southern New England chapter of the Kosciuszko Foundation (named for Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a Polish American hero from the American Revolution), Mr. Zielinski believes this to be the only membership-based Polish American cultural organization in the area (there is the Polish Center at Elms College, but that's a different sort of organization). (see below).

The Society sponsors monthly meetings of the membership from September to May on the 3rd Monday of each month at 7:30 at the Chicopee Elks Club. Meetings feature business of the Society, typically a speaker or other cultural presentation, a brief Polish lesson, and often singing, all followed by refreshments and socializing. The membership is large, with 250 the typical attendance. This meeting was small, I was told, with about 125 people in attendance; about 2/3 were women. Mr. Zielinski says that most of the members are over 50, and this appeared to be so from this meeting's attendance, although I noticed a handful of younger people (teens or college-age) in the back row who were singing along in Polish with everyone else! The Society would love to attract more younger members. Christmas is the one time when a number of younger people are actively involved. The Christmas party (this year on the 3rd of December) features singing with accordion accompaniment, and sometimes a production of the nativity.

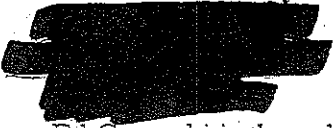
This meeting began with a brief Polish lesson, proceeded to reading and approval of the minutes of the last meeting, installation of officers, a number of raffles for fundraising, and then a sing-along. Enclosed in this report are the Society Newsletter, the text for the Polish lesson, and the handout of folksongs which began the singing portion of the program. Alexander Zielinski led the singing. Typically the singing is accompanied by live accordion music, but the accordionist was not present so taped music was used. The last song on the handout of songs, "Sto lat!" is apparently sung at birthday parties. After we completed singing the seven songs in the handout, various members of the group were encouraged to come to the front and sing other songs which they remembered. These were all referred to by group members as "folk songs," and included children's songs, patriotic songs, and songs that moved from the popular to the cultural repertoire. Most of the songs which individuals came forward to sing seem to have been children's songs, or other songs they remembered hearing from their parents, and most were known and sung by a large portion of the audience. The song included in the "five minute Polish lesson" which begins "Miala baba koguta," for instance, is a children's song which, obviously, teaches by repetition; Mr. Zielinski told me that other verses feature other animals and other places to put them. The folk song portion of the meeting was very lively, and there was much banter back and forth between the organizers and members of the audience, much of it in Polish, about songs to sing. After the singing, everyone shared refreshments, some of which, particularly the kielbasa and a wide variety of cookies and candies, were described to me as being Polish foods. The Polish sweets included chocolate-covered ginger cookies, a cookie with apricot filling, and a pancake-like cookie with powdered sugar.

Other activities: there used to be Polish picnics in Agawam, at which the Society often sang and danced in costume. These don't continue, apparently. The Society is planning to

sponsor children's essay contests in the near future. They do give college scholarship money to young people in the community.

Other interesting people/tradition bearers who are part of the Society:

Ed and Teresa Cynarski



Ed Cynarski is the publicity/programming director for the Society. He sets up the speakers, musical events, etc., and might have good leads (although I did not have time to talk with him directly). Teresa Cynarski is a native Polish speaker and leads the "five minute Polish lesson" at the meetings; I believe she also teaches Polish on a more formal basis in the evenings at St. Stanislaus School. Both were very engaging personalities.

Frank Curylo

Chicopee

Directs the **Lutnia Chorus** at the Polish National Cathedral Church on Bell Street in Chicopee. They are said to be very good. He also is a bandleader. I understood, perhaps incorrectly, that he plays the accordion. He is currently ill and was not in attendance at this meeting.

Edward Dzielenki


Ed Dzielenki was not at this meeting, but he is the Society's Vice President and also the man in charge of publications. Often at meetings he will display and speak about the latest literature on Poland and Polish America.

Ed and Arlene Jeronczyk

Greenfield, MA

I spoke on my way out the door with this wonderful couple who, like Mr. And Mrs. Zielinski are on the board of directors of the Society of Polish American Culture. Ed Jeronczyk is also on the organizing committee for the Festival which happens each year at Old Deerfield/Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association (variously referred to as the Slavic Festival, the Polish/Ukranian Festival, etc--I'm not sure what the official title is yet!). I did not get their address, but they should be easily contactable through the Society. I did not get a sense of any specific traditions to follow up with them, but I will try to catch up with them again at the Festival in September to speak some more. They also mentioned a Polish television show (in Polish) broadcast from New Britain each Sunday from 2-4.

Other contacts suggested

Carolyn Topor



[REDACTED]

Ms. Topor directs the Southern New England chapter of the Kosciuszko Foundation based at Elms College. The Kosciuszko Foundation serves as an umbrella organization of sorts for Polish American organizations, with its main offices in New York.

We should let Lynne Williamson in CT know about the *szopki* contest and show held each year around Christmas at **Asnuntuck College** in Enfield, CT. There is also a "Szopka Festival" at the **Hartford (CT) Polish Home** on the Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend, featuring *szopki* made by area children, a pageant, etc.

The date for the **Slavic Festival** at Pocumtuck Memorial Association has been set for Sunday September 30th this year.