

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ukranian People of Youngstown

Personal Experiences

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HELEN PRONICK

Interviewed

by

Frances Martin

on

December 8, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN PRONICK

INTERVIEWER: Frances Martin

SUBJECT: Holy Trinity Church, wedding customs,
recreational activities

DATE: December 8, 1975

M: This is Frances Martin of the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. I am interviewing Mrs. Helen Pronick at 127 S. Osborne, Youngstown, Ohio, on December 8, 1975, at about 7:30 in the evening. The interview is in reference to the Ukranian community in Youngstown.

Mrs. Pronick, I understand that both of your parents are from the Ukraine or rather were from the Ukraine.

P: Yes, my mother and father. When they came to America, to Youngstown, I was the sixth child out of the thirteen born to them. I was born in Youngstown, and I was baptized at St. Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church in Youngstown. This was on the west side of Youngstown, because we did not have a Ukranian church in this area at that time. My sisters and brothers were born in Elmira, New York.

M: Are these your older sisters and brothers?

P: My oldest and then the others were born here in Youngstown.

M: Where was your father from?

P: My father is from Zoobensky, and my mother was from Lisko.

M: Was that in the Ukraine also?

P: That was in the Ukraine. My mother and my dad came to America in 1894 and they settled in Elmira. They got married in June 14, 1898. They came to Youngstown from Elmira.

M: Did they come from Europe together?

P: They came together on the same ship.

M: Did they have relatives here?

P: No, they just came.

M: Why did they come to Youngstown?

P: Because there were steel mills. My dad got a job at U. S. Steel.

M: What part of town did they come to live?

P: They lived on the north side of Youngstown.

M: Did they own their house or did they rent?

P: They rented for awhile, and then they bought their new home in 1907. That's when I was born.

M: Is that also on the north side?

P: Yes, on Jefferson Street.

M: So they bought their own home?

P: Yes. My dad's name was Maxim Gleza. In English it was Glazzy. My mother's former name was Mary Lischak.

M: You mentioned that your father had some trouble with his name when he went to the steel mill.

P: Yes. When they came, they couldn't speak English. When they went to the steel mills, the people asked them what their name was. They didn't know how to say it in English so they named him Mike. Everybody called him Mike, but his name was Max Gleza.

M: Even the people that worked with him?

P: Just the people who worked with him, but the Ukranians knew him as Max.

Then my grandfather came across and he stayed with us. He was pretty old at the time, and he worked as a watchman at the Erie Station. He saved up some of his savings, about \$300, and as they were trying to establish this church my granddad said that he would donate his life's savings. That was about \$300. He said, "As long as I'm living that would go towards the church, and when I die they could bury me." That just what they did.

M: What church was this?

P: This was Holy Trinity.

M: Was there a parish then?

P: Yes.

M: What was your grandfather's name?

P: My grandfather's name was Nicholas Lischak.

M: He wasn't here too long then?

P: Yes, not as long as my parents. He was 89 when he died. He died around 1916 when I was nine years old. He got \$300 at that time, which was quite a bit of money.

M: That is quite a bit.

P: For founding of the Holy Trinity Ukranian Catholic Church, they bought the property on Rayen Avenue. It was a really old four-room house. That is where they held the church services. The founders were my dad, Max Glazzy, my uncle, Nicholas Lischak, Luke Hritzko, Elias Betsa, John Fak, Nicholas Polovischak, Sam Sawchak, and John Thurick. These men were all from the Carpathian Mountains of the Ukraine.

M: They were all from the same background?

P: Yes. They are affectionately called the Ukranian Nobles. Before they had the church they didn't have anywhere to hold the services, so they used to go to St. Mary's Catholic Church. Many times on Sundays my dad used to come home, and he said they would just ridicule them, saying they didn't belong there. That's when my dad said that we were going to start our own church.

M: In other words, they weren't too welcome at St. Mary's?

P: No. The people at St. Mary's were more Slovak. Then my dad and these men who I mentioned got together and started going from house to house trying to get some money. People wouldn't donate too much at that time because they didn't have that much. But they did get enough for a small down-payment. They bought the land where they said they would build the church. They didn't even have enough money to have an architect come and design the church for them. So my dad, Mr. Betsa, Mr. Hritzko, and Father Zatcerkovney went to Cleveland Church. It was a beautiful church. Father Zatcerkovney with a pencil and a pad designed the church himself. That how he wanted this church to look, and that's how he designed it.

The parish started in 1910, and the church was completed in 1911. It is amazing that these poor people who had very little or no schooling at all in the Ukraine were able to delegate plans for such a beautiful house of worship. It still remains as one of the three most beautiful Ukrainian Catholic churches in this country.

The church activities for the young people were the choir, the plays, and the concerts, which were presented very frequently. The parishioners looked forward to these because the church was always the center of family gatherings. The ethnic churches were very important to early immigrants because here, at least, there was no language barrier. These people always enjoyed gathering at weddings, christenings, and the dances. The Ukrainian weddings usually lasted three days. Events such as these kept these people together and happy.

M: Why did they last three days?

P: I don't know. The weddings usually lasted two to three days. They started with the day before the wedding, preparing food, cleaning out the living room, folding up the rug. The next day they went to the church before 10:00, were married, came home, and danced to a live orchestra, usually they had either gypsies or a few Ukrainian musicians. They danced until about 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning. The next day the guests would come back to finish up the food and the drinks and danced the whole day. The invitations were not sent out, but the bride, the groom, and the best man would go from house to house inviting their friends and relatives.

M: How many come?

P: Usually around 200 people.

M: Would this be at the house?

P: At the house. It was a wonderful time.

M: I'll bet the houses were really crowded for awhile?

P: There were a couple of rooms. The kitchen had cooking, the basement had drinks, and the living room had the dancing.

M: Did the musicians ever get paid?

P: They didn't pay by the hour, just a certain price. If you wanted a special dance or something you put some money in the bass and they would play for you. In the bridal dance the matron would sit in the corner on a chair with a plate on her lap covered with an apron. You danced with the bride,

and you would have to break the dish. It would have to be half dollars or dollars in silver and whoever broke the dish danced with the bride.

M: They threw it at the plate?

P: Yes, right at the plate in the lady's lap.

M: Would this be men and women?

P: Yes.

M: It sounds like it would be kind of hard to break a plate?

P: They got a free dance with the bride.

M: A free one if they broke the plate?

P: Yes.

M: If they didn't break it did they have to pay?

P: Yes, they paid to dance with the bride.

M: On these weddings did they give many gifts, many material gifts?

P: No, just money.

M: They didn't have showers?

P: No, no showers.

M: You would get money for gifts?

P: Yes.

M: Did you build up your own trousseau?

P: Yes, from the money we got we started our own. Of course, the bills first had to be paid. My husband had to pay for the wedding; it was the husbands that paid for the wedding, not the mother of the girl.

M: Was this a custom of the Ukrainians?

P: Yes.

M: So you had to use your wedding money to help pay for that?

P: Yes.

M: That's interesting.

- P: The church flourished only because the parishioners worked hard with devotion and pride. In the mid 1920's a group of dissidents no longer wanted to be members of the Catholic church; they wished to sever relationship with Rome; that was when they began forming the Ukranian Orthodox Church now known at the Sts. Peter and Paul, in Youngstown. Then during the Depression years, when the Holy Trinity Ukranian Church was experiencing financial difficulties, many of the parishioners mortgaged their homes in order to save their church. God was good to them and no one ever lost any of this security.
- M: They were really lucky because it was dangerous times as far as homes were concerned.
- P: During the Depression, Father John Zabawa was the pastor of the church. He worked very hard and he would go out in the farms with my husband and pick apples from trees, and we had picnics and we raffled a basket of apples. They would cost us nothing where we would make about \$6 or \$7 on a basket of apples; that's how Father Zabawa worked hard to cut the mortgage. If it wasn't for Father Zabawa, I don't know. He really helped. He was here at our parish for about fifteen years. When Father Zabawa was leaving the whole parish cried and they signed a petition; they didn't want to let him go, but he had to leave. The whole parish went crying down to the station to see him off.
- M: Did he transfer?
- P: Yes. The Ukranian children didn't have a parochial school, so on Saturdays we would go down for about an hour to learn to read and write. We would have catechism in order to get our First Communion and that's about all the education we got.
- M: After you got your First Communion did they continue with catechism?
- P: After we got our First Communion, not they didn't continue.
- M: You had some classes in Ukranian language?
- P: No, we just learned the plain Ukranian language, just one class, just to read and write. We didn't have first, second, third, and fourth grades. We learned from the alphabet just to read and write and that's all the education we had in Ukranian.
- M: You had learned how to speak it at home?
- P: At home we spoke it with our parents because our parents couldn't speak English. In fact, sometimes our parents

even learned to speak English a little from us kids. In fact, my dad and my mother learned from us pretty good English. They never went to school.

M: Not here at all?

P: Not here at all, no.

M: Did they become citizens?

P: No.

M: I think you have to know how to read in order to become one.

P: My dad became a citizen, but not my mother.

M: Where did you go to school?

P: I went here in Youngstown to a public school.

M: Where was that?

P: That was on the north side, Jefferson School. My sisters and brothers went to Covington School when we lived over on the other side of the tracks. I was a little younger so I started in Jefferson School.

M: You had mentioned that your neighbors were Polish?

P: Most of my neighbors were Polish and Ukranian mixed. We used to just mix with them. I learned to speak in Polish.

M: I understand from talking to someone else that Ukranians and Polish didn't always get along that well.

P: They didn't. Not too well. I don't know, we all got along very nice.

When we were young kids our parents were strict. We weren't allowed to be out late; we weren't allowed to go to dances. If we did go to dances we went in groups, boys and girls. Sometimes our parents would even come along to the dances because it was usually the church dances. The church sponsored the Halloween dances and other dances and it was all for the church's benefit. I think our parents brought us up very good because it was not like it is now; you hear about so much crime and stuff. Then you weren't scared to go out on the streets. Children played outdoors even until 9:00. We had a curfew, 9:00. There was no danger. Ladies would go to town and there wouldn't be crime. We would sleep on really hot summer days on the porch, on the

lawn. The doors were wide open. We weren't scared.

M: Did you have many electric fans then?

P: We didn't have any electric fans, no, not at all. In fact, I remember we didn't even have screen doors. I remember we used to have oil lamps and when I was ten years old I remember when we first got our electric lights. We were so happy with the lamp.

M: Was it just a light bulb or did it have any fancy fixtures?

P: No, it was plain. As far as heating the house, we used to have a potbelly stove. We would have it in one room and it heated two or three rooms at one time. In the upstairs, we would have two bedrooms and there would be three or four children sleeping on one bed. We would have feather beds to keep warm. It seemed that the winters were colder then than they are now. I remember our windows used to be so frosty that we couldn't see through them. We took a brick on this potbelly stove when we went upstairs. We would heat a big brick and wrap it in a towel. We would bring it up and that's how we got our beds warm. There were four or five sleeping in one bed, and there were two beds in one room.

M: Did you not have any heat upstairs at all?

P: We didn't have any heat at all upstairs. It was a long time before we got a furnace. I remember that winters were so bad that we used to go to school and the snow would be up to our knees. We used to just wrap our face up so that all you could see were our eyes. We used to walk back and forth to school for lunch. We didn't have any buses like they have now. Some kids would have to walk at least a mile to school. If the weather was zero, children who lived far from school were allowed to bring their lunches. We didn't live too far away so we had to come home for lunch. Those winter days were really cold.

M: As far as food went, did your mother cook the same food as your neighbors?

P: No. We had to watch our budget. My dad didn't make very much money then. I don't know if they would bring a couple of dollars pay. I remember when soup meat was 5¢ a pound. A loaf of bread was 5¢ a loaf. My mother used to cook a lot of homemade soup out of beef. We used to eat a lot of sauerkraut and potatoes. On Fridays we didn't eat meat; my mother used to make peroghi. On Sundays for a treat my mother made pigs in the blanket.

We would go to church; they made sure us kids went to church

on Sundays. We walked to church too. If we would get a nickel, if our uncle came over to visit, we weren't allowed to spend it on candy or anything; we gave a drop in the basket on Sunday when we went to church.

Movies, we never went to movies; we couldn't afford them. They didn't have too many movies in those days, not until after I was married. They had vaudeville. After I was married we used to go. There was the hippodrome. Then there was like a sugarbowl. They used to go in there for ice cream.

M: Was that downtown?

P: That was downtown, right at Spring Common.

M: They would have that when you went downtown for entertainment?

P: That's right. Very few of us went to movies. We would just go for walks, a bunch of us girls. We would walk and entertain ourselves that way. We didn't have money to spend. Nobody had money. We all were so happy. It seemed that Sunday and Saturday went so fast and we would have to start school again Monday. Money didn't bother us then. Of course, we didn't have it, but we didn't know what money was either.

M: It didn't worry you not having any?

P: We couldn't have any. Like I said, our parents were poor too. We weren't so poor that we didn't have anything to eat. We always had something to eat, but, like I say, we weren't rich. We were always happy. I wish those days were back again.

M: Were you parents pretty well-satisfied here? Did your father ever get disgusted and want to go back to Europe?

P: Never. They loved it here; they would never go back to Europe. They were glad that they came here. I think it took my mother and dad twenty-three days on a boat to get across the ocean to the United States. When they came here, they didn't have any parents, nobody. They were like strangers. They just had to start for themselves. That's how my mother and dad got married. They just loved it here; they would never leave. I know my mother and dad said they would never go back to Europe because they knew how bad it was there.

When we graduated from the eighth grade there were a few of us that were lucky to go to high school. At our eighth grade graduation, we had gowns and we had our pictures taken. We got diplomas because we graduated from the eighth grade. After the eighth grade I worked. We all looked for a job

and most of us found work. There were a lot of girls who went into the laundry. A lot of them went to stores in town. I worked down in the Central Store downtown for awhile. They had a combined clothing and grocery store. That was right there down near the square. I got married. I worked about a year and after that I had married.

M: After you married did you work?

P: After I got married I never worked, no. My husband worked; he had a good job. I had my first daughter and then I just stayed at home. We rented for about five or six years and then we built a home. When we had just finished our home, the Depression came. In order not to lose it, we rented it out on the west side. We went back on the north side into a two-room house, two rooms with another family. We lived on that rent. That was the Depression; no one worked then.

M: There weren't any jobs then?

P: No. My husband was too proud to go in a soup line. We lived from the rent we used to get from our house.

M: You couldn't afford to stay in it with no money coming in?

P: No, I couldn't.

M: Did you get any other jobs then?

P: No, after the Depression was over he got his job back. He had a very good job; he was an engineer on the locomotive. He used to run one of these dinkys they used to call them in the mill. He worked in transportation. He used to transfer the iron ore from one part of the steel mill to the other. When he started they used to have these engines that you used to have to fire up with coal and keep the engines going. Later on, after he worked for about twenty-five years, they got diesel engines, where the trains were run by electricity, so that was easier. He worked in the mill for forty-five years and he retired.

M: So you bought this home right about when your husband retired?

P: Before my husband retired. We had to sell my other home. We have been living here now for thirty-three years. My husband passed away now six years in January. He was on retirement for ten years. He enjoyed life ten years. We really enjoyed his retirement because we had a car. He had a car for about forty years and we used to go and visit a lot to New Jersey, New York, Atlantic City.

M: Do you have relatives there?

P: He has; I don't have any relatives. He has a half brother in New Jersey.

M: Was he also Ukranian, your husband?

P: My husband was Ukranian.

M: Was he born in Youngstown?

P: No.

M: How old was he when he came over here?

P: He was young; he was eighteen almost. He didn't have anyone here either. He didn't come straight to Youngstown though. He went straight to Delanore.

M: Is that in New York?

P: Pennsylvania. He worked in the coal mines. I think he worked about four or five years when he came to Youngstown. He went to the steel mill and that was one job that he was on forty-five years.

M: That's very steady work.

P: Yes.

M: How old was he when he got married?

P: He was a lot older than I. He was twenty-eight when he got married and I was seventeen. He had young ideas and, although he was a foreigner, he had American ideas. He had a very responsible job.

M: Was he educated?

P: He wasn't educated either. He became a citizen, an American citizen.

M: He learned how to read and write then here?

P: No, he couldn't read and write at all. He wrote his name in order to get his citizenship. He went to this international institute and that's where he learned to write a little and that's where he got his citizenship.

M: He was able to hold a job even though he hadn't had a formal education?

P: Yes. In fact, if he could have read and written well, he

would have been promoted to a higher and better job. The job he had he liked; he was satisfied.

M: That's good then; that makes a difference. Your first child was born with the assistance of a midwife?

P: Yes.

M: That was the common practice?

P: Yes, that was the common practice. Most of the deliveries were with the midwife.

M: She was the one who registered the birth?

P: Yes. She couldn't even speak very good English, but that is why if we went down for our social security record or something, we had a hard time finding out who were.

M: She would put down as best as she knew?

P: That's right.

M: The lady you had was not a registered midwife?

P: No.

M: I understand that some area have ones that were registered almost like RN's?

P: Yes. This one wasn't though.

M: She just had a lot of practice?

P: Yes, that's right.

M: She was foreign-born too?

P: She was foreign-born, yes. My other daughter, when she was born five years later, was delivered by a doctor and his wife, who was a nurse. I delivered the child at home too. The doctor and nurse both came to my home.

M: Was that common then?

P: It wasn't common, but it was more than before.

M: That was about 1928?

P: Yes, about 1928.