

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ethnic Groups of Youngstown

Personal Experience

O.H. 1180

RUTH J. FABIAN

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

August 4, 1988

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: RUTH J. FABIAN
INTERVIEWER: Molly McNamara
SUBJECT: Hungarian customs, St. Stephen's of Hungary,
dance groups in the church
DATE: August 4, 1988

M: This is an interview with Ruth Fabian for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Ethnic Groups in Youngstown, by Molly McNamara, at 598 Wilson Street, in Struthers, Ohio, on August 4, 1988, at 2:00 p.m.

Mrs. Fabian, can you give me some background on your family; your parents, your brothers, and your sisters.

F: I have three brothers, two of which worked in the steel mills. The third one works for a commercial. When the steel mill went down, my brother Edward--he was in the service for awhile--went back into the service. He is making a career of it. But my brother Arthur had worked down at Sheet & Tube. Then, his boss had gone to Republic and got him in, so he is presently at Republic. When my grandparents came over, my grandfather went to the mill.

M: Where were your grandparents from?

F: Hungary.

M: Do you know where in Hungary?

F: Mezokovesd is where my grandmother came from. I don't know about my grandfather. My grandmother came over

when she was 15. That was in about 1905. She had married my grandfather over here, and they had six children. The baby was six months old. My grandfather was working down at Republic. The bridge that you drove over. . . .

M: Yes.

F: The steel went on them and killed them.

M: Wow.

F: She had these six little kids to raise. So she used to take them downtown somewhere at the Christ Mission, and they took care of the kids so she could go to work in the day.

M: That was terrible.

F: So it was a hard life, but that was the way it was. Then, they moved several times and. . . .

M: Did she ever remarry?

F: Yes, but she ended up in divorce because the man, all that he wanted was for her kids to work for him.

M: Really?

F: Yes.

M: Wow, that sounds like a hard life.

F: Yes, it was. Actually, my grandmother was in her 50's, but she used to go day work. As a child I remember her taking me. We went to clean this house and we rode the streetcar on Southern Boulevard. We went clear to the end of the line, and then where she was cleaning--you know, it was so early in the morning--she would tuck me in and go to sleep for a couple hours while she cleaned. That is the way that she did things because she didn't have an education to do anything better; so she did just a little cleaning to help out.

M: Did she speak English?

F: Oh yes.

M: She probably had to in order to work, right?

F: Yes. Well like my dad, my dad worked. My dad had come from Pennsylvania and he went to work first for the Republic and then he worked out at the arsenal. Then World War II came along and he got a job at the arsenal. He had been in the navy previously, and they kept

sending him letters to come back. Then he did go back to the service, and when he came back, they wouldn't give him his job back at Republic, so he went to Sheet & Tube. So he worked at Sheet & Tube until he died.

M: Where were you living as a child?

F: Brownlee Woods.

M: What street in Youngstown?

F: Pine Hollow Drive. You drove over that bridge, too. It was a real pretty bridge.

M: What was the ethnic neighborhood like where you lived? Where there a lot of Hungarian people that lived there?

F: No, a mixture. There were a few, maybe two or three, but when the Hungarians came over, a lot of them settled in Campbell. That is why our church at that time had a lot of people from Campbell that were Hungarian. When they went to build the new church, they figured that they had better stay there because of all of these people, but all of these people are dead. We only have a couple families now from Campbell, but then on the South Side there was a lot of Hungarian people. On the West Side that I know for sure, this is where they, more or less in bunches, settled. If they couldn't speak English, they had to stay with. . . .

M: Stay with there own kind.

F: Right. Where they could talk.

M: What were the other ethnic groups then that lived in your neighborhood. I am just curious, was there. . . .

F: A mixture.

M: It was a mixture?

F: Yes, that was a mixture. You see, my grandmother had a house on the West Side. From the West Side, she came to Brownlee Woods. So I think that the first place she lived was off of Poland Avenue, on Williamson Avenue, some place more or less on the South Side. So that is where she started out and that is where all of the Hungarians were, but a little bit later they settled in Brownlee Woods.

M: Okay, when you were talking about your father working in the steel mills, do you know exactly what kind of job he had? Do you remember, do you recall him talking about his job?

F: He was a lineman. He died in 1973, so it hasn't really been to long.

M: Yes, that isn't too long ago. What about your mother, did she work outside the home?

F: Yes, my mother worked at what was called--first it was called Steiner's Packing House, and then it was High Grades. Then when they started to build the freeway, they tore it down, so it went when the freeway was being built. It was torn down. Then after that, she worked at Maag's Meat Packing Plant for almost 20 years.

M: I see. Wow! So that is gone now? Today it isn't there?

F: Maag's is even knocked down, because Ohio Edison built more buildings and took Maag's. I don't even know how many are left. I know that there are a few left in town, though.

M: Could you tell me what it was like going to school? First of all, where did you go to elementary school?

F: Jackson School in Brownlee Woods.

M: Do you remember. . . ?

F: I had to walk. Oh yes, I had to walk, and I thought that it looked so new then. It must have not been too old when I was a youngster. I loved my school, and I still do when I go passed it. But you know, it wasn't anything extraordinary. Then I went to Wilson. When I was in Wilson, you know, I was in all of the good clubs and honor societies and everything, and then we had to move. We moved to Struthers, and I didn't know anybody.

M: What year did you move to Struthers?

F: 1949. You know, it is so hard after you're going to high school and then you have to start all over again, but Struthers high school was just like going to college. This is the difference between Struthers and Wilson. Wilson was so easy and I thought, "How could this be so hard?" I mean, I never heard of final exams, We barely had six week tests at Wilson. I mean, that was such an easy school. So that was the difference; that is the comparison in schools.

M: Did you find that the people in school, the background of these people for instance, their ethnic makeup was different than it was at Wilson? You probably went to school with the same bunch of people.

F: A little bit. There were a lot more Slovak kids going to Wilson. So that, the Slovaks must have settled more. I know that they did in Lansing. See, that is right around Wilson area there.

M: Right.

F: Now Struthers, that was more or less mixed.

M: Did you get along okay in both places?

F: Yes.

M: You didn't had any problems?

F: No.

M: When did you move here, on West Wilson?

F: Well, for a year we lived with my mom and dad. They lived down on Hamilton Boulevard, and then we bought our home up here. We have been here since.

M: Do you find this neighborhood much different from where you lived when you were a child?

F: Yes, because we were all young couples. This was all a new development and mostly young couples with their little families, you know, and we all just grew up together.

M: So there is a big difference?

F: Yes, and where I had lived as a child is really different.

M: Do you have any idea why your grandparents came to the United States?

F: No, I think that it was for a better life, probably.

M: Everybody that I had talked to. . . .

F: It had to be for a better life.

M: Do you think that they found that when they came here?

F: Well I guess, because my grandfather worked in the mill. I don't know what they paid, but he did get a job in the mill. So I assumed that it all worked out until he got killed. He was 35 years old when he got killed.

M: He was young. Do you remember anything like--I know that you were probably too young to remember the depression I am sure.

F: That is when I was born.

M: Yes, so you were real young.

F: I was born in 1933.

M: I was thinking towards the later 30's, but still you were too young then. What about the 1940s? Do you remember much at all about World War II?

F: Oh yes, I remember.

M: What can you tell me about that?

F: The radio. I remember the milkman. My grandmother wheeled and dealed the milkman because she had a son that was in the service and my dad was in the service, and she needed butter to make kiffuls.

M: What is a kifful?

F: A kifful is a little raised dough, and you put apricot or lakvar or something like that, and you roll it up. That is a kifful. Kiffuls or kolacki or whatever, and I remember her when she made them, she had a clothes basket and it was full. But I remember wheeling and dealing the milkman to get the butter and what she needed all of the time. And the stamps, you know, the ration stamps for shoes, sugar, coffee, meat. That was rough.

M: What was downtown Youngstown like at that time?

F: Exciting.

M: Was it?

F: Yes. Well, I remember all of the dime stores. I remember my aunts and uncles. They didn't come to visit that often, so my grandmother would take me and we would go downtown. Maybe we would go to a show. The bus wasn't coming for awhile, so then we would go window shopping, just looking in all of the windows. Then we would go up to the square, the square was round. We would go to the Isaly's over there, and you got the biggest ice cream cone. I mean, it was like a skyscraper.

M: You were probably too young to remember, but I have had a couple people tell me about the open markets downtown

on either East or West Federal, where they sold the animals like chickens.

F: No. I remember the chicken store, though, way down on East Federal, and I remember going in there. I thought it smelled because, you know, when you killed the chickens and all of that.

M: Yes, it has changed quite a bit since then.

F: Yes, and I remember that there was the Central store.

M: You are the second person that has said that.

F: Do you know what was so cute? All of these wires, and then, they put the money in. They put it up on the hickey, and it would just go on the wire. Then, it would go to ladies that would take the money out and give you your change. Then, it would come back. I remember that.

M: I had somebody else describe that to me, too.

F: Yes.

M: Where was this store?

F: East Federal.

M: It was a department store?

F: I remember yarn goods being there, but I don't know if it had everything or what, but I remember that and McKelvy's. We went to McKelvy's a lot and the first A&P. Anybody tell you about the first A&P?

M: No.

F: That was the first big, you know, like our big grocery stores. We used to go downtown on the bus to go to the A&P, and we came home with these shopping bags on the bus.

M: When did they get rid of the . . . Well, they weren't cable cars. What were they? The buses that had the cables attached to them?

F: I used to ride them because I take the buckeye bus to town, and then I would have to take another bus to go up to church. Those buses had those hickies on them. I would say when I was 12 or something like that, 1949, after the war maybe, after World War II. . . .

M: Those were the ones that you were describing when your grandmother used to take you?

F: No that was the . . . They still have something running. They have a railroad running there.

M: Oh, those ran on a track, in other words?

F: Yes, that was on a track, so that was different. These were . . . what did they call them, trolleys?

M: Maybe trolleys. I'm not sure. I know that they had wires.

F: Yes, and that was stuck on that thing above, so that must have been the trolley.

M: Yes, I am sure that they had lines strung all over the place.

F: I would have to take it to church.

M: I see. Could you tell me a little bit about your church? What church do you belong to?

F: St. Stephen of Hungary on Wilson Avenue.

M: Okay. Did your parents belong to this church?

F: My mother.

M: And your grandparents did, too?

F: Yes. And you know, it is a Hungarian church, and St. Stephen is our patron saint. There is a big painting of him behind the . . . in the center. I mean, when you walk in our church, that is the focal point that you see.

We have a lot of customs. Shortly, we will be celebrating St. Stephen's day, which is supposed to be August 21. We usually have kids dress up in the native costume, you know. In the procession, they will carry the statue of St. Stephen in, and then, we will have the kids in costumes sit in a row. And this year, we are having just a little brunch after the mass, but we used to have real big dinners for this.

M: What other ethnic customs do you practice within the church? Do they still do this in the Hungarian church, where they seat the women on one side and the men on the other side? Do they still practice that?

F: Basically, but me and my husband and all of our family all sit on the right hand side. When I was younger, the women were more or less--of course, that was during the war, so most of the men were gone.

M: Right.

F: The women were on the left and the men on the right, but we always just sit on the right.

M: But you don't know why they practice that, though?

F: No.

M: I'm curious. I don't either. Did they wear the shawls still, or did they ever do that?

F: No, we wore hats until it was okay not to wear a hat. There are people that still wear hats.

M: I know a lot of the older women do put a shawl on. I don't know what the purpose really is of that.

F: I remember that my grandmother always had her babushka on.

M: Oh really? Maybe it was just an older custom that they had it on.

F: Yes, they were used to it from the old country, because it was so cold.

M: It makes sense.

F: I remember that she always had to have her babushka.

M: Okay. Can you describe some of the other ethnic customs that you practiced, for instance, over Christmas or over Easter? What do you do? What is a typical day on Christmas Day or Christmas Eve?

F: Christmas Eve is our big mass, midnight mass. Everybody starts going in about 11:15 p.m. to get a seat. At about 11:30 p.m., they start playing music. Then at 11:45 p.m., the procession comes in. The young girls group, which is called the Sedality, they always march. They have the angel down and we always have a little lighted candle. It is real dark, and all you have is this candle before the actual mass starts. It is real pretty.

M: Now, you are in charge of the dance group?

F: Right, yes.

M: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

F: I have tried to keep it going. For 27 years I have kept it going, and we more or less dance all over town

for different ethnic festivities and the regular Hungarian things. In March, there is a big independence program, and we always perform for that. Then, we have our church picnic that is in July and we dance for that, and Hungarian Day which is coming up on the second Sunday in August. Then there is a few other things like the Canfield Fair and where all nationalities go. I like to get the kids involved.

M: How did you get involved in this?

F: I did it all of my life. I've danced all of my life.

M: Oh really?

F: When I was 5 years old, that was my first performance out at Idora Park. That is where we held our Hungarian days, at Idora Park. Then I started out in the afternoon, we danced in the Hidelburg, which was like a beer garden. In the evening, we moved down to the big ballroom.

M: Who got you involved in this, your parents?

F: Yes, and then I had taken dancing lessons. So when they used to bring teachers in to teach, I started with this Hungarian dancing. That is how it all started.

M: Okay, I understand. Did they dance . . . did they have traditional clothing that they'd wear and everything?

F: Yes, when I danced as a child we used the white skirt with the red and green ribbon. You know, red, white, and green. The red vest really decorated real pretty and the little crown. All of a sudden, the folk came in, all the folk dances. So now we are in completely different costumes. Before, you could look and you could spot a Hungarian outfit just like that. Now it is, you know, we do one dance number with red skirts and we have another one where it has pale pink and pale blue, and then it has a jacket on top. All of these things came in from the villages, and they are bringing in all of the village dances. [It's] a different type of dancing completely, so I am lost. I had to get somebody else to do this teaching, because I didn't know anything about it. I am more or less the director.

M: Are these dances all symbolic of the religion?

F: Well, they are different things. They mean different things.

M: For instance, what?

F: Well, right now we have the boys doing a Hurdsmans dance with sticks. The little girls do a dance with pillows, and the girls do the bottle dance. So there is different. . . .

M: What does the bottle dance. . . ?

F: It is just the young women dancing, balancing the bottle of the wine on their head. Of course we use water, but it has to be balanced. Everybody thinks, "Oh, how do you stick it on?" It is not stuck on, it is balanced.

M: Wow! Do you find a lot of children interested in this?

F: Not enough. I wish that I had a lot. When I danced as a girl, I was just like the assistant. We had eighty-some dancers and, I mean, these were all couples in there 20's. I was only 15 at the time, and these couples were in there 20's. Probably about three or four couples got married, and it just went on down the line to the smaller kids. Now, it is like pulling teeth to try and hold them until they are in high school. They don't have time. You know, they are in basketball, soccer, this and that, and it is really hard.

M: That is a shame because it is like they are losing something in a way.

F: I know.

M: And they don't pass that on.

F: And we go places, we go all over. It is such an opportunity, and it is really hard. Last weekend we went to Kennywood Park. We were invited to dance for Hungarian Day. That was real nice. They had about 500 people in the audience, which was a big audience watching; but you have to expose them so they can see other groups. They had another group from Pennsylvania there, but they were grown up. There are not too many people like me that handle the little kids.

M: What age group are the children?

F: I start usually at four or five.

M: Oh, they are young.

F: Yes, nobody wants to bother because it takes a lot of patience and a lot of time.

M: How many children do you have now?

F: I only have like 14.

M: Well, that isn't too bad, though.

F: As long as I can stick around 12, 14, I can still put a good show on. The more members you have, the more problems you have.

M: Yes.

F: So, it is a lot of work.

M: When you are talking about Hungarian Day, are there dancers? Do the other churches in this area participate?

F: Yes, there is the Federation. We call it the Hungarian Federation, and that is composed of all the Hungarian churches.

M: So they are all. . . ?

F: The most active is our church.

M: Oh.

F: I mean, we don't even have any dancers from the other Hungarian churches. It seems like we are the strongest of all the Hungarian churches. We are the strongest. They call us the "Mother Church." So, that is why I have tried to keep this dance group going. I figure I don't care how many, it is better than having nothing. When you need kids in costume, who do you call? Me, because I am the one who has them.

M: Well, that is a wonderful way to keep passing traditions on.

F: Yes, it really is.

M: Do you follow any of the costumes, for instance, that your grandparents or your own parents passed on to you? Hungarian traditions?

F: Well, the cooking.

M: What kind of things do you make that are traditional?

F: Chicken paprikash, stuffed cabbage.

M: Do you make these only on certain days or certain holidays?

F: No, whenever I feel like having them. And the baking, I like to bake kolacki, and the kiffuls, what we were talking about, and polinchitoes, which are the crepes.

M: How about your children, do they follow these traditions?

F: The girls. Even my daughter-in-laws. Now I have gotten them cooking the different things. We have a cookbook out from our one club now. It has a lot of the good recipes in it.

M: That's great. For Hungarian Day do you all get together as an organization and bake?

F: Yes, I mean the Federation . . . being that I have the dance group--the dance group belongs to the Federation. I was asked to prepare a roast or stuffed cabbage. Instead of preparing everything together, they found out that it is harder to get people together, so they ask individuals that they can trust, that they know will do a good job. There are certain people, and they will be making chicken paprikash. I make the stuffed cabbage. Somebody else will just prepare the kolbassi with sauerkraut. Then we just take it there, and they sell a lot of food on Hungarian Day.

M: I see, and this goes on where?

F: Shady Run [Road]. We have been at Shady Run, years ago it was Idora. It was always Idora where they had the swimming pool. I am sure a lot of people remember the swimming pool. Well, they filled it in and they made kiddie land there. They still had picnic tables, and that is where all of the cooking was done. Then up on the hill, it was like a picnic area up on the hill at Idora, and they served the food up there, too.

M: But you guys had to move.

F: Yes, so we had to go to Shady Run now, which is good because it is central. People get right off of the freeway and it is right there. So, it works out real good.

M: So you still participate with a lot of these traditional customs that you have had and have passed them along.

F: Yes. My friend now, she prepares all of the food that should be prepared like at Easter time. I don't. I more or less just go with the traditional.

M: Probably with what everybody likes, right?

F: Yes.

M: I find more and more that people saying. . . .

F: At Christmas there are a lot of different things like fish and everything. Hungarians even prepare, which I haven't got into it because I didn't see my grandmother doing it either. So it just all depends. My friend, she saw her grandmother doing all of this and the grandmother passed it to her mother and. . . .

M: I didn't realize that they made fish on--are you talking about Christmas Eve?

F: Yes, they serve the fish.

M: Oh, I didn't know that. The Italians do that. I mean, that is their main thing for Christmas Eve. Most of the Italians that I have talked to describe the preparation of it and everything, and I have never heard of that before of Hungarian.

F: I know my neighbor makes some kind of mushroom soup for Christmas dinner.

M: Do you think that these different customs like that are from different areas in Hungary maybe?

F: Possibly.

M: But you are not familiar with these? Okay, do you speak Hungarian?

F: A little. I can follow through if I have to. See, there are two types.

M: Oh really?

F: There is a lower class, which is probably normal, and then there is an upper class Hungarian. The words are really a lot different. It is harder to catch a lot of words.

M: Is it just a dialect?

F: No, some of the words are completely different. I mean even in my husband's family, because my husband's family is all Hungarian, too. They are from Girard. The words that I hear my mother-in-law say are so different from the way we say them.

M: Excuse me. I know I am going by Italians because that is where I have found that there are some different dialects, and it does sound like there are different words that they are speaking, so I can see what you mean. Do you find that difficult to communicate with other people in the parish, for instance?

F: No, I am pretty good in the parish. When I go to different affairs and somebody comes up to me, and they really start rattling away, I say, "Slow down." I tell them, "I understand, but I don't understand everything." But I like reading. I don't know what I am reading, but I love to read. As a child I went to Hungarian school a couple of times.

M: Oh really?

F: Yes, but I don't know what I am reading.

M: Do a lot of people in the church speak Hungarian, or are they more or less too young?

F: More or less they are dying off. The new ones like my age don't bother with it, but me with the dance group, I am stuck. A lot of times people come up to me, and they will say stuff. For instance, I went to an embroidery school a couple years ago, and they had an embroidery school at the old Institute. There was a woman there, and I really liked her. She couldn't talk English, so when we were all done with embroidery school, she told me in Hungarian, "First when you came, I said a couple words. The next time you came, a little bit more and a little bit more." I was really doing good at the end, but she brought it out.

M: Sure.

F: She forced me. My grandmother talked to me quite a bit when I was little. That is where I picked it up. After my grandma died, my mother didn't even bother with it, you know. She hardly ever said it, only when we didn't want the kids to know something.

M: I hear everybody say that.

F: That is when it comes in handy, you know. You want to sneak a little bit.

M: That's funny. How about your children, do they speak Hungarian?

F: No, just the normal words you teach everybody you know.

M: And your grandchildren?

F: Yes, these guys go to Hungarian Bible School in the summer. Gloria was telling me to ask her the colors. So I asked her the colors, and she was saying all of colors, which is wonderful. Even a little bit it helps.

M: So that helps to pass everything on as well.

F: Yes.

M: I didn't even know that they had a Hungarian Bible School.

F: Yes, at the Monastery on Belle Vista, on the West Side.

M: So that passes it along.

F: Yes.

M: Do your granddaughters dance, too?

F: Yes, these guys all dance. My son that was just here just got a divorce, so we only get the kids every other weekend, but I get them involved when I can, too.

M: That is wonderful.

F: Yes.

M: Okay, is there anything else that you would like to talk about or you could give me information on before we run out of tape?

F: No, not right off the bat. Unless you ask me something, I can't think.

M: Have you ever been to Hungary?

F: No.

M: How about your parents? Did they ever go at all?

F: No.

M: Nobody in your family has ever been back?

F: No. I think that my grandmother went back once after she had her first son. She went back one time I don't know what for, visiting or something. She came back, though.

M: Do you have any desire to go there?

F: I don't, not really.

M: You don't think that there is anything there for you?

F: If I knew someone over there I think that I would want to go back. Like my mother-in-law went with my sister-in-law, but that is kind of an interesting situation because my mother-in-law. . . . Where she was born was on the border of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. She had to

go to Croatian School. She doesn't even know how to read or write Hungarian, but they are Hungarian. So they went back but she had cousins. She has living relatives there.

M: Yes, so she had somebody to go back to.

F: That is what I mean. You know, that gives it more meaning. Of course, if I had the money probably I would say, "Well, let's go on a trip," but I am not to that revolution yet.

M: Well, there are some people who even if they don't have family there, they are still like, "Oh, I have to go back because my father used to talk about this or my grandfather used to talk about this." you know. They would like to see what the old country looks like, but I am just curious. That is just a question that I am curious about?

F: Like I said, if I had the finances I probably would go, or I would go myself. I need some new aprons or blouses, though.

M: Okay, well I think that will be about it. Thank you.

F: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW