

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERISTY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ethnic Groups of Youngstown

Personal Experience

O.H. 1192

STELLA MARIE TORTORA

Interviewed

by

Molly A. McNamara

on

August 24, 1988

STELLA TORTORA

Mrs. Stella Tortora is of Polish ancestry and describes the Polish traditions and ethnic customs. Both of her parents were from Poland and came to Youngstown in the early nineteen hundreds.

Mrs. Tortora was born in Youngstown on August 10, 1918. Mrs. Tortora grew up on the South side of Youngstown in an ethnic neighborhood. She provides accounts of holidays such as Christmas and Easter. She effectively describes ethnic foods and customs of the Polish people in Youngstown.

Along with her descriptions of the Polish community, Mrs. Tortora talks about Youngstown itself and the changes throughout the years.

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INTERVIEWEE: STELLA M. TORTORA

INTERVIEWER: Molly A. McMamara

SUBJECT: Traditions and customs such as Borszc & Uszka

DATE: August 24, 1988

M: This is an interview with Stella Tortora for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Ethnic Groups of Youngstown, by Molly McNamara, at 790 Orlo Street, Boardman, Ohio, on August 24, 1988, at 11:00 a.m.

Mrs. Tortora can you give me some background on your family? On your parents, and brothers, and sisters?

T: Well, my mother and dad came in from Poland.

M: Do you know what city they were from in Poland?

T: Kareszow, and they were married here at St. Stanislaw's Church, Youngstown, Ohio. I have no brothers or sisters. And I was born on Wayne Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio.

M: Wayne Avenue?

T: Yes. It was a...Part Polish neighborhood and a few Slo-vak's. Then we moved from Wayne Avenue to Ellenwood Avenue in Youngstown and I started first grade at St. Stanislaw's.

M: Now, do you know why your parents came to this country? Do you have any idea?

T: Yes, to make money and go back and live more comfortably. My dad didn't come for that reason, because his mother and dad were established here.

M: I see.

T: Then my dad started to work in the mill. No, he first started to work in the pop company. He started in a bottling company.

M: And that was in Youngstown?

T: Yes, on Franklin Avenue in Youngstown. It is now the Holly Beverage Company.

M: Oh, okay.

T: And from there he went into the mill.

M: Do you know what he did in the mill?

T: Yes, he was a crane operator and later on an electrician.

M: Okay.

T: He and my mother were friends in Europe and were reunited in Youngstown.

M: What ever happened to their idea of going back to Poland?

T: They didn't have enough money to go back, and besides my father wasn't keen on returning to Europe.

M: Really?

T: Yes, she did housework and she didn't make that kind of money. She was just lucky that a relative had taken her in and she didn't have to pay the rent. Then she had an accident. She was hit by a streetcar. She couldn't work for awhile and then she went back to work. Well, it wasn't enough to go back to Europe and about this time my mother and father decided to get married.

M: Do you think that they were ever disappointed in not going back?

T: I think that my mother was. My dad wasn't but my mother was. Because she wanted to go back to see her mother and father and her sisters and brothers. She had three sisters and two brothers. And she was the only one that came to the United States. But father, he wasn't anxious to go back. He said that he would never go back. He always said that because it was good living here. He

didn't want to go back.

M: Yes, it's just a different life.

T: Right.

M: So, tell me what it was like growing up when you were a child on Wayne Avenue?

T: Well, you know we didn't have money. We lived in two rooms. We had a family that lived upstairs. My mother and dad didn't own the house and we rented.

M: You were borders then?

T: No, no there was just a family that lived upstairs. Very quiet. We didn't have any modern conveniences. I remember the gas light, the coal stove, that we had for awhile on Wayne Avenue, but we had good times. We would go sled riding at the dump there on Wayne Avenue and had good time playing with other children. But not like today. Children don't know what it is like to have friends who play together, sled riding, jumping rope, playing jacks.

M: The neighborhood itself you had started to mention that there were other Polish people living there.

T: Oh, yes.

M: Now, were these people from like the same villages that your parents were from?

T: No, no they weren't from the same village. They were from different parts of Poland.

M: Because I was thinking that maybe that was the reason why your parents settled on the street or on this area.

T: The reasons that we settled in that area was because my mother's girlfriend had brought her from Europe.

M: I see.

T: And she lived over in that area. Not on Wayne Avenue but on Wabash Avenue.

M: So, how do you think your family got along with the other people in that area? The other ethnic people?

T: Oh, very good, very good. It was like one big happy family.

M: Even with the language barrier and everything? There was no problem?

T: No. We had Irish people living next door to us on Wayne Avenue and they coped with my mother not being able to speak very well in English. They helped her along, which was the nice part and then when we moved to Ellenwood Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, we had neighbors, Mrs. Fesler, and she would come over everyday and talked to my mother in English so that she would be able to pick it up more of the language. Of course my dad didn't have too much of a problem because he worked in the pipe mill nad picked up the language faster.

M: He was kind of forced to.

T: Yes.

M: When did you move then to Ellenwood?

T: When I started school in first grade. That was back in 1925 because I think that the church was built in 1925, yes. I started there and continued thru the eighth grade.

M: What do you remember about grade school? Anything?

T: Oh, what I remember about grade school is what sticks in my mind. Is gosh they pounded in going to the convent.

M: Really?

T: They wanted every girl to go to the convent and believe me they were really going until we had Father Milcarek come in and he stopped it. He said, "You will not go to the convent when you graduate from the eight grade. You go to high school and then if you still want to go to the convent call home first."

Oh, yes we had plays and things at St. Stanislaw's like programs, and graduations, dances and Polish Heritage.

M: And is that where you started to learn the Polish language?

T: Oh, well I knew it because my mother and dad spoke nothing but Polish at home. There was nothing to learn. I learned to write and read also.

M: And that was taught to you in school?

T: Oh, yes one hour everyday.

M: Do they still do that everyday?

T: No.

M: That is ashame.

T: Of course, we no longer have a school at St. Stanis-lau's.

M: That is why.

T: But I don't think that it was compulsory. They had classes after school if they were interested in learning the Polish lanugage. It wasn't compulsory.

M: I see. Do you remember anything about the Depression?

T: Oh, yes my mother went to work during the Depression. I remember my dad wasn't working. He was laid off because the pipe mill shut down My mother went to work she was cleaning the Paramount Theater. She was a janitress.

M: Were those bad times?

T: Oh, yes. We didn't have a telephone. We didn't have a car. We had to take the bus or walk. And I was an only child. I had to eat and do whatever they wanted me to do. There was nothing special.

M: Do you remember Youngstown itself? What the whole city was going through? I have had people tell me about the rations, rationing and whatever. Do you remember much of that?

T: Yes, the ration stamps - sugar, gasoline, of course we weren't worried about gasoline because we didn't have a car. We always had food at home. My mother baked and she cooked food the old-fashion way, nothing fixed extra ordinary. So, it was always potatoes and meat, cabbage.

M: Do you remember much about World War II? I am taking you through time here a little fast, but?

T: Well, I worked at the G.F. during the war because all of the boys were being drafted.

M: What is the G.F.?

T: General Fireproofing Company, it was an office furni-ture manufacture, but converted to airplane parts.

M: Okay.

T: It's on Logan Avenue. There was mostly women working at that time.

M: Really?

T: Just a few older ones, but the younger. Of course we had dances here and there were soldiers at Camp Reynolds, in Pennsylvania I never went out to the USO, but there were groups of girls that would go there to meet the soldiers. It was sad. It was nothing enjoyable. I kind of stuck around the house because there was nothing to do.

M: It is funny because I have heard different people tell me different things. One person would say, "Oh, that was a wonderful time." Because this area was so alive then you know there was industry and whatever. It picked up so much. Or everybody was so excited after the war was over. Right after that period of time. Then I have had other people tell me that it was very depressing because so many people had died in the war from this area.

T: I had two cousins that were killed in the war.

M: So, people view it in a different way.

T: Oh, yes. Of course after the war it was a different story. Well, what started during the war we would go into town for coffee, and pie and when you would walk over South Avenue bridge and all of that mills was working you couldn't walk over there without having soot and things flying all over the place.

M: And you were married in 1945?

T: Yes, not here in Youngstown.

M: In Youngstown?

T: No, I was married in Columbus, Mississippi. Dan was in the service.

M: Oh, I see. And then you came back to this area?

T: Because it was his choice to come back.

M: And then did you move to Orlo?

T: No, we lived on Ellenwood Avenue until the freeway came through and...

M: I have had people who tell me this.

T: Yes, and we were kind of leery because we were told that the house would be taken or we were right along side of the freeway, and we decided to move, in 1959. Of course, my two children went to school at St. Stanislaus's and I had to drive Bob and Cindy down because

there was no bus service.

M: Yes, that is kind of a distance from here.

T: But they both graduated from St. Stanislaw's. Bob with a scholarship for Cardinal Mooney from Father John Grabowski who died. He left money for scholarships. Bob was the first student to get a four year scholarship for Cardinal Mooney High School.

M: Oh, that is great.

T: Then Cindy had one year of the scholarship for Cardinal Mooney High.

M: Now, do your children speak Polish?

T: No, and believe me they are sorry. Now, Cindy lives in Chicago and she occasionally has a cleaning lady come in and would you know she is Polish.

M: Yes, I know that there is a big Polish community in Chicago.

T: Right. Yes, and she calls me because the Polish cleaning lady can't speak English and I communicate with her. There is another one who came over here to make money and then she is going back.

M: I see. I didn't know that they permitted them to do that still?

T: Yes, she is here for six months she told me.

M: I see. So, she just you know works and then goes back.

T: She has a family there (Poland), and she is going back. I said, "Don't you like your working over here?" She said, "No."

M: I guess that it makes a difference when your family is some place else.

T: Yes.

M: Living here where you live here on Orlo is it much different from where you grew up?

T: Yes.

M: How so?

T: Oh, yes. Well, people aren't as friendly and they stick to themselves and where on Wayne Avenue we were one big happy family.

M: I wonder why? Do you have any idea why?

T: Well, I think that it had to do with you didn't have too much. You were close because they didn't have anything, and I didn't have anything.

M: So, you sort of depended on one another.

T: Right. Where as now you know people are already prosperous and just don't want to be bothered. Well, my neighbor next door, she and I were the only ones that were close.

M: What about the nationality or the ethnic make-up of the area, is the same as when you grew up?

T: No.

M: Probably mixed?

T: Oh, yes everything.

M: Yes, I find that a lot. It seems like so much of Youngstown has gone away from that. I don't know of any street today that are specifically one group of people where as it used to be.

T: I don't. I think the reason for that is the mixed nationalities and marriages we have.

M: That is true to.

T: And then they move out.

M: Yes. Talking a little bit about the church itself, can you describe to me some of the customs that you practice? For instance, one Christmas? What practices go on in the church?

T: Well, we have Midnight Mass that begins with a procession, and singing Polish caroles.

M: On Christmas?

T: On Christmas Eve. Then we have our Christmas Eve Willa dinner. Now, when I was growing up my mother and dad when they were having Christmas Eve dinner they would have straw under the table and have an onion in it. In memory of the God Child in the manger.

M: Oh, really?

T: Yes, It was every year we had that. And of course when I grew up she didn't do that. We always had first

stewed prunes, herring, and mushroom gravy, and beet soup with dumplings that were filled with mushrooms and they called it Uszka in Polish. And Christmas kolachi. At this time we break the traditional wafer (oplazek) and exchange good wishes.

M: It was more of a vegetarian?

T: Yes, right.

M: I know the Italians do the same thing with their fish.

T: At our church every May we have devotions, and also have October devotions. We have a 9:00 a.m. masses at our at our church in Polish.

M: That is great. I know so many of these churches have gotten away from that. Either they don't have now...Is the priest Polish?

T: Yes, Father Neroda.

M: In fact I have his name and I haven't contacted him but...

T: He is originally from Campbell.

M: Oh, okay.

T: He was born and raised there.

M: But I know some of the ethnic churches don't even have a priest who is...I think that in a way that is a shame though.

T: Well, I think that it is the young people. They are not interested to speak Polish or any other nationality. But oh, yes my mother had sisters and when she passed away and I had to keep constantly in contact and write to them. In fact I get a birthday card, or not a birthday card, names day. Polish people celebrate names day more than birthday.

M: Oh, really?

T: Yes, so my name day is May 8th, St. Stanislau's Day, instead of my birthday.

M: They still practice this? I know that the Greeks do the exact same thing. They practice the names day and that is more important than your birthday.

T: Yes, your birthday, right.

M: But they're the only two churches that I notice that do

that, the Greek-Catholics.

T: Well, that is in Europe not here.

M: What about Easter is there anything?

T: Resurrection. Well, when I was growing up it was 6:00 in the morning Resurrection Mass, but now days we have Vigil Mass at midnight.

M: Do you eat any traditional meals?

K: Yes, a traditional meal is that we bake at Easter, Easter bread (Bulka) with yellow raisins in it. And we serve ham with hard boiled eggs and when we have the greetings with Easter eggs we always say, "Christus Zmartfistal," and that is "Christ has risen" in Polish. So, and every year I sent my children to bless the Easter basket with food that is eaten Easter breakfast hoping they will continue the custom.

M: So, you have passed on some of this tradition to your children?

T: Yes, and I was surprised my son, which I never thought would ever think about these things...The couple years that I didn't make the beet soup with the dumplings in it, he said to me, "Mom, how come you never make that beet soup that you used to make at Christmas time?" But I didn't think my children would think about these traditions. Now we have the Christmas traditional dinner.

M: Now, do a lot of the Polish people practice the same ones or is this just a specific?

T: I think that they all do.

M: Do they? Because it seems like I would say 99% of Italians do still eat fish or you know that is not just particular to one family or something. Or one or two families, it seems like the majority of them do.

T: Oh, yes.

M: Are there a lot of people from Poland originally? Are there a lot of immigrants that belong to the church or are they most second and third generations you think?

T: Well, you know that they are dying out.

M: Yes.

T: We have a lot of displaced people you know they call them DP's.

M: Yes. Now, do these people all seem to get along?

T: Yes, they seem to. Yes, they have a group up at the Polish hall for Krakusy Society and they are quite active there. They even have their own Polish dances, Polish Krakowiaki.

M: So, this keeps a lot of the ethnic groups together then?

T: Together, yes. And it seems like there is a lot of the young people who are involved at the Polish hall. More so than at our church.

M: Are there any other Polish churches in the this area?

T: Well, we did have St. Casmier's but it is no longer a Polish church, St. Joseph the Provider in Campbell, and that is no longer Polish. I don't even know if St. Joseph the Provider had a Polish mass?

M: I don't know.

T: They have a Polish priest there, but I don't know whether they have the mass there. St. Casmier's, that was a great big congregation.

M: What happened to that one?

T: Well, other nationalities moved in.

M: Just moved in.

T: Then there was St. Anne's but they closed and their members went to St. Casmier's

M: I see, because it is rare that they close up a church.

T: Right.

M: That is what usually happens. I didn't realize that was Catholic and Polish at one time.

T: St. Casmier's is the only one. Then we have an independent church that broke away from our church - Sacred Heart, the national church. That is on Comeron Avenue.

M: Oh, really?

T: Oh, I think that when I started school, or about the third grade they broke away from St. Stanislau's and organized there own church.

M: That is interesting.

T: But of course we had nothing to do with them.

M: Yes, are they still a Catholic Church?

T: Well, they have their own bishop and their own clergy, but they are not affiliated with ours. They don't recognize the Pope.

M: Oh, I see okay. So, I guess when they broke away they severed everything?

T: Yes.

M: Okay. So, do you still keep in contact then with your relatives in Poland today?

T: I don't. I only think that there is one that sends me a card and I haven't received a names day card from her so I am assuming that she has passed away. Well the children are there, the cousins are there but I don't keep in contact with them. The reason that I don't is because they expect too much.

M: Really?

T: You know you send them a package or some money and they want an accordion, and they want bricks for a house, and many, many other things you just can't keep up with it.

M: Yes, so do you pay much attention to what is going on over there, like today?

T: Well, you mean like about my father, not wanting to go back?

M: Yes.

T: Well, yes. I don't keep in contact with anybody over there to find out about that. I feel bad because they lead a hard life over there.

M: Yes. Have you ever had any desire to go there?

T: No, but my husband, oh he would love to go to Poland. I said, "How are you going to communicate with them?" I said, "Why would you want to go and see all of those poor people with their hands out for money." You know you just don't have enough to go around.

M: Yes, but then again that is where your parents grew up. You wouldn't want to see where they were from?

T: No, because she had a hard life. They were poor, poor.

No, I think that it would break my heart to see all of that.

M: Really?

T: I have no desire to go.

M: Okay, that is interesting.

T: I wouldn't want to see all of those poor people over there who don't have anything to eat or clothes.

M: So, you consider yourself fortunate for having your parents come here and settle?

T: Oh, yes indeed. Well, of course I suppose if you live in that environment that you are able to cope with it.

M: Yes, I guess that you don't have much of a choice?

T: Right, exactly.

M: Okay, is there anything else that you could give me some information on or is there anything that I haven't covered that you would like to mention?

T: Nothing that I could think of.

M: Okay, well that is fine, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW