

Why I play Polish Folk Music?

by Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz

I play Polish folk music because of my grandparents and I am proud to say I am a fifth generation Polish Texan. They were simple people making a living off the land as did their parents and every generation that came before them. My grandparents were the first generation to be born in the United States, Chappell Hill, Texas to be exact. When their parents (my great grandparents) and my great great grandparents, came to Texas in the 1880's, they came with little or nothing except the customs and traditions of their homeland to begin a new life in a new land. One of those treasures was the music they brought from memory because none of them could read music but were gifted and talented musicians. We play this music today to honor those that came before us because they took a chance in coming to another country so that we could have a better life free of oppression and persecution. My grandparents, especially my grandmother Franciszka, taught me to be proud of my heritage and not to be embarrassed to be Polish. My grandmother, Babushka as we would call her in Polish, was an inspiration and mentor in teaching me to respect my Polish heritage. She taught me to cherish the values of faith, family, friends and fun. Our Polish music is the tread that binds the Polish American community together today as we have almost lost our ability to speak Polish and many of our customs tied to the farm and/or church. Each and every holiday and/or celebration in our culture has music associated with it. Music creates the atmosphere of any event and music brings back memories of your past while creating new memories in the present. If a picture is worth a thousand words, music is worth a thousand memories!



*Stefan and Franciszka
Mazurkiewicz, my paternal
grandparents.*

Upon reflecting back on my life, my heroes were Szczepan (Stefan) and Franciszka (Francis) Mazurkiewicz. They were my paternal grandparents and the inspiration that drives my passion and love of our Polish culture. Stefan was the youngest of six children and Francis was the third child of fourteen and they were both first generation United States citizens. Neither of them finished elementary school or spoke English but were two of the most influential people in my life. They were honest, hardworking, respectful, humble, forgiving, virtuous, thoughtful and most of all loving. My grandfather (*Dziadek*) was an agriculturist, conservationist, economist, loving husband/father, and a musician. He inspired me to major in agriculture, provide for my family, be conservative, be frugal and to play the concertina. My grandmother (Babushka) was a teacher, leader, loving wife/mother, good Catholic and proud of her Polish heritage. She taught me to speak Polish, to be a strong Catholic, how to lead by example, to be proud of my Polish heritage, the importance of family & friends and to embrace your culture and customs. Because of the love and support of my grandparents, I have been personally blessed

with many rich and beautiful treasures. There is no doubt that these two individuals have been most instrumental in my life and there is no question that their impact lives on today, especially in my personal and professional life. This is why I play Polish Folk Music.

Polish music is lively and upbeat! Typically, a Polska Kapela (Polish band) is made up of a fiddle, bembem (Polish tambourine), standup bass, clarinet, and a button accordion. Originally, there were no brass instruments in a traditional Polish Kapela, however, you will see this today in many Polish polka bands in the US as well as in Poland. Brass instruments were introduced through German influence, but the fiddle is the signature Polish instrument. When the Polish immigrants came to Texas, they brought their fiddles as did the Irish and other immigrants that used the fiddle as their main instrument. You may have heard the song “If You’re Gonna Play in Texas, You Gotta Have a Fiddle in the Band.” There is no doubt in my mind that the Polish immigrants have played a major role in introducing the fiddle to Texas Country Music.



“Polska Kapela” playing for “Polskie Dzien” Polish Days in Bremond, Texas on June 22,2013 with CJ Jozwiak, Frank Motley, Charlie Brossman, Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz and James Mazurkiewicz.

In the literature today, many times German and Czech immigrants were given credit for the introduction of polkas and waltzes to Texas. However, many of the German immigrants were actually Polish people under Prussian rule. During this period, Poland was partitioned by three neighboring empires of Prussia, Russia, and Austria from 1795 until 1918. The Polish immigrants that came to south Texas in 1854 from Silesia and to east central Texas in 1866 from Poznan (Posen: German during these years) were citizens of the Prussian Empire. To make a point, all eight of my great grandparents’ immigration papers listed them as citizens of Prussia. This would have been true for many immigrants coming from this region of Prussia. Even today, many people of Polish descent do not know that they are actually Polish instead of German descent. In addition, when these Polish immigrants came to Texas the official language in these regions of Prussia was German. The Polish people were not allowed to speak Polish in public, only in the home. It is amazing to me that the language, the music, and culture survived during this difficult period, but our Polish music gave them comfort and peace. This was also true when our ancestors immigrated to Texas, it was our music that provided a sense of comfort in their new homeland.

During World War I, Germany once more occupied Poland and stayed until 1945. At this time, Communist Russia pushed the Germans out and redrew the map of Poland, as we know it today. During this period, Poland became a satellite state of Russia and not until 1989 did Poland become a Republic. Poland gained its independence as a result of the Solidarity movement in the 1980's. I bring all this up because the Polish immigrants that came during the great migration have been left out of our Texas history because Poland did not exist on the map during the great immigration of Poles to the United States. When these immigrants came to this country, they were asked from which country did you immigrate from and they honestly provided information from the countries that existed at the time. The Polish people that came to Texas were Prussian (German), Austrian or Russian citizens although they were Polish people in a divided Poland. However, immigrants came to Texas from these countries as well. This is only stated to re-write history and provide equal recognition to the Polish immigrants that came to Texas and the contributions they have made to our culture and the music we hear in Texas today.

The Mexican culture has given credit to the Polish, German and Czech immigrants for the origin and sound of the Conjunto Norteño music in Texas. According to my research, Polish (Prussian), German and Czech migrants to Northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest brought different styles among them: *la redova*, *la varsoviana* and the polka. Many people to this day do not know that *la varsoviana* means from Warsaw in Spanish and is the popular Texas dancehall melody "Put your little foot". These European immigrants fueled the demand for a local brewing industry, and they also influenced the music scene by bringing the accordion, waltz, and polka, which were part of the popular music of their homeland. Soon, local bands adopted these elements, and a new unique style gradually resulted from a blend with Mexican *ranchera* styles. This new style soon became a unique *norteño* genre, thus named because it was primarily popular in the northern regions of Mexico. Many people to this day do not know that *la varsoviana* means from Warsaw in Spanish.

Another contribution to Texas music is the story of "The Westphalia Waltz." This past year a documentary film was researched and produced by Joe Weed telling a fascinating story of a Polish folk song and how it became an American country fiddle classic. The melody of the Westphalia Waltz derives from a Polish song known by several titles, "Pytała Sie Pani," "Wszystkie Rybki," and others. Joe has cited references from Poland's National Library in Warsaw and the Polish Museum of America in Chicago. In the 1930's, Steve Okonski, a Polish fiddler from Bremond, Texas brought the tune from Chicago to Bremond, Texas's largest Polish settlement. This tune was picked up by Cotton Collins and he registered the copyright in 1947 and named it after a small Texas village of Westphalia. The "Westphalia Waltz" was recorded by many artists, notably Floyd Tillman 1947 and Hank Thompson in 1955. In addition to "Pytała Sie Pani" (The Westphalia Waltz), "Put your little foot" (*la varsoviana*) and "Maiden's Prayer" are just to mention a few melodies that the Polish immigrants have contributed to our Texas and American music.

As a child growing up, I can still remember the three-day Polish weddings with Polish music, food, dancing, traditions and of course, Polish Soda water (*piwo/beer*)! My parents were both from large families with my mother being one of 10 children and my dad one of three, but his parents had 15 siblings. In all, I had hundreds of cousins and many Polish weddings to go to almost year around.

The Polish wedding is the most important and revered of all the Polish customs and it was a great sense of pride for the father of the bride to host a wedding for family and friends. The Polish word for wedding “wesele” comes from the word “wiselic’ sie” meaning to rejoice, and that is indeed appropriate for an occasion traditionally associated with joy and celebration. To this day, I can still hear the Polish melodies and lyrics of the Polish musicians playing at the weddings all day and night. It stands to reason that I learned to dance when I was 5 and the first dance, I learned was the oberek a Polish waltz in 6/8 time. My mother taught this dance to me at one of my cousin’s weddings and this dance was a favorite amongst the Polish immigrants from the region of Poland my ancestors came from. This melody has a distinctive rhythm with the heavy third beat. The name "Oberek" is derived from "obracać się" which in Polish means "to spin." During this dance, men love to stomp their feet on the wooden dance floors creating additional percussion to the melody. To this day, the oberek is one of my favorite Polish melodies.

As my great grandparents would like to say, “they did not leave Poland, they left the oppression of Prussia and still were Polish at heart, but proud to be Americans.” I cannot remember an event or celebration that did not have Polish music. This was part of our culture and to this day it survives in the music I play with my friends and cousins of Polish descent. In the last three years, I have formed a group “Polska Kapela” (Polish Band) and we play our Polish Folk Music inherited from our ancestors for anniversaries, Polish Catholic Church festivals (St. Stanislaus in Chappell Hill, Our Lady of Czestochowa in Houston, St. Stanislaus in Anderson, St. Mary’s in College Station, Bluebonnet Festival in Chappell Hill, and several other events.

My grandfather played a one row German button accordion and I would sit and listen to him play and tell his stories on the front porch of the original farmhouse of my great grandfather. My grandfather inspired me to play music, so when I moved to Chicago/ Green Bay after college graduation; I became interested in the concertina. So, I took six concertina lessons in 1978 from Art Welgus in Green Bay, Wisconsin before I moved back to Texas to marry my sweetheart, Kathryn Gore. Since then, I have been self-taught and continue to listen to other Polish artists to learn from them. One of the most influential Polish musicians in the Chappell Hill community that I grew up listening to, was my great uncle Zigmund Jozwiak. He was the youngest brother of my grandmother Francis and he was the accordion player with the Polish Eagles band. The Polish Eagles were the most popular Polish Folk band in the Chappell Hill and Houston Polish community. They played most of the weddings for the families from this region of the state. As a result, Zigmund had a strong impact on me as I grew up listening to their music until



“Polska Kapela” playing for the 2012 “Dozynki” festival at Our Lady of Czestochowa Catholic Church in Houston, Texas with CJ Jozwiak, Frank Motley, Charlie Brossman, Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz, James Mazurkiewicz and Mark Hopcus.

his death in 2009. He played at my parents' wedding, my wedding and sang at our oldest daughter's wedding. However, the great Polish fiddler Brian Marshall played for our daughter's wedding and uncle Zigmund played and sang a few songs to continue the family tradition.

In 2008, Uncle Zigmund and I played a few numbers together at my Uncle Henry's birthday party in Chappell Hill and at this time he told me who had inspired him to learn to play the accordion. He said that my grandfather Stephan Mazurkiewicz played the accordion for many of the Polish weddings and house parties back in the day and he would sit at his knee and watch him play. He said this encouraged him to play and provide our music to another generation. It was very ironic to hear this because I used to sit at Uncle Zigmund's knee and listen to him play as well. It is my wish that I have inspired someone to continue to play our Polish Folk music for another generation to hear.

Over the years, my friend and Polish fiddle player Brian Marshall and I have re-introduced an old Polish custom of "Polskie Kolędy," Polish Christmas Caroling, in the Chappell Hill community. This custom involves singing Polish Christmas Carols in Polish with musicians and carolers going from farm house to farm house entertaining the families, usually on Saint Stephen's Day, December 26. This Polish custom dates back to the 14th century and the carolers are dressed in nativity costumes and the host families are to provide food and drink for the carolers. In addition, we have reinstated 'Dozynki' (Harvest Celebration) during the fall at St. Stanislaus Catholic Church in Chappell Hill to give thanks for the annual harvest. With each of these celebrations, they are all tied to the church and christian values with music providing the upbeat and lively atmosphere. Polish customs are filled with tradition and symbolism peppered with fun and entertainment. Life is a wonderful gift and it is meant to be cherished and celebrated.



Above: "Polskie Kolędy" Polish Christmas Carols sang by Polish descendants on December 29, 2012 standing in front of the home of Stefan and Franciszka Mazurkiewicz.



Left Side: Jam session with the next generation at Jozwiak Store in Chappell Hill, Texas after "Polskie Kolędy" Polish Christmas Caroling.

As you can see, I play Polish Folk Music to honor my ancestors that came before me to this great country and I play so that another generation can hear the music I heard growing up as a child. The music we play is one of the treasures that we inherited from our ancestors. The music that we play today is as pure as it was when they arrived in this country over 160 years ago.

There is an interest in Poland today in producing a documentary film of the music we play to preserve and reintroduce the music that was imported from Poland. They are interested in rediscovering Polish music untouched by partitioning of the country, two World Wars and Communism and re-introducing it in Poland. One such song we play today is "Ojciec mój wielki skakał do belki" that dates back to the 13th century from Wielkopolska documented by Oskar Kolberg a 19th century ethnographer, folklorist and composer. In addition, we play another 25 melodies that were brought from Wielkopolska Poland to Texas in the 19th century.

In the past several years, I have had the privilege of establishing many contacts in Poland and making many new friends. In 2009, I took my youngest daughter Stephanie, my son James and my Uncle Henry to Poland for a personal pilgrimage. This trip inspired my son James to learn more about his ancestry and he became more interested in Polish Folk music. As a result, he began researching Polish musicians in Poland and began conversations with a young musical band named "Tekla Klebetnica." Over the years, James, Zygmunt Czupryn and Ania Adamowska became



The "Tekla Klebetnica" band from Poland with band members Zygmunt Czupryn, Marek Konček, Anna Adamowska, and Marcin Bobak.

Facebook and Skype friends. My son introduced them to me via skype and I told them that I would be in Warsaw June 8, 2013. They decided to drive 4 hours to meet me in Warsaw and come a play a concert for me the night before we traveled back to Texas. That evening, I invited the group traveling with me to hear this Polish band perform. With me were 5 Tarleton State University faculty, 2 spouses and 10 Polish Young Farmer Exchange participants. Everyone enjoyed their music and was

overwhelmed with the quality and talent of the group. Prior to this, my son and I had invited them to come and play for us in Texas and my family and I would host them if they came. This face to face meeting and concert sealed the deal and gave both sides an opportunity to meet the other before committing. After the performance, Dr. Marilyn Robitaille, one of the Tarleton State University faculty, invited them to play at the Granbury Arts Festival September 4, 2013 if they came to Texas. After arriving back in Texas, the band members Zygmunt Czupryn, Marek Konček, Anna Adamowska, and Marcin Bobak agreed to come to Texas and play for the Brazos

Valley Fair & Expo, the Granbury Arts Festival and the St. Stanislaus Catholic Church Festival. As president of the Brazos Valley Fair & Expo, I was very excited to host the “Tekla Klebetnica” band in Texas and showcase our Polish Music to the citizens of the Brazos Valley.

The “Tekla Klebetnica” band began their career in 2006, when Zygmunt and Ania met playing Polish Highlander music together. Over time, they were interested in looking into other folk music including traditional Polish, Slovakian, Hungarian, Romanian and Gypsy melodies performed in their own arrangements. Each of the four musicians was connected to music since childhood from the ages of 5 and 6 years old. Later, Ania and Marcin studied music at the Music Academy in Katowice and Marek studied at the Music Academy in Krakow. Zygmunt is the only one of the groups that is self-taught. In addition, Ania and Marcin grew up with traditional Polish folk music, Marek with Slovakian, and Gypsy music and Zygmunt was a member of an orchestra and they each draw inspiration from their roots. They have played all over Europe including countries such as Ireland, Germany, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Italy, Georgia, and Uzbekistan. They have played in many festivals including Taca Dancer, Musicastrada, Sharq Taronalari, Art Gen, The World of Accordion, and many others. One of their musical highlights was performing with world gypsy musician and European Star, Maestro Roby Lakatos, and his ensemble.

As you can tell from this article, I am proud of my Polish heritage and I wanted to share my story to help inform others about the contributions of the Polish culture in Texas. I have been blessed to be touched by so many of my friends and relatives that I feel compelled to pass these treasures on to another generation. Some of the most important gifts in life cannot be bought or sold but given to one another through love and inspiration. I will continue to play the Polish music of my family as long as God will let me play my concertina and now you know, “Why I play Polish Folk Music.”

Kathy Mazurkiewicz, Dr. Jim Mazurkiewicz, Basia Ostrowski, Marianna Lech, Dr. Zbigniew Wojciechowski and Grazyna Wojciechowski in Polish Folk costumes representing the Łowicz and Krakow Regions of Poland at the 2012 “Dozynki” festival in Houston.



This article was written August 23, 2013 and since then I have learned that I am a 5th generation Polish Texan descending from the Wielkopolska immigration to the Brazos Valley beginning in 1866. We are very proud to have preserved our Polish Folk Music, Wielkopolska Polish Dialect and Polish Traditions for over 160 years.