

POLKA

FROM PAGE A1

Man: The Polish-American Musician in Twentieth-Century Detroit, which will be distributed by Wayne State University Press in October.

The road to publication was not an easy one - and it has cost her in time, money and no small level of frustration. But Palazzolo remained steadfast in her belief the story of the 20-some musicians profiled in her book had to be told, if only to preserve the history of that era.

Her mission, she says, couldn't have been accomplished without the help of God, her father's spirit and her husband's support. Sorting through her father's belongings, she found sheet music Ted and Ruth Gomulka had published, audio tape recordings of record company auditions, and even an audition of WXYZ television's Club Polka program.

And she knew instantly this history had to be preserved. "The children of second-

generation Polish-Americans are finding this stuff and throwing it away," she said. "The artifacts really capture what a community it was."

As she contacted the families of her father's musician friends, doors opened to her and loved ones shared their memories and memorabilia. Now encased in that thick binder, they include photographs, show posters, advertisements for events, records, pay stubs and countless other items Palazzolo has woven together in her 440-page book.

So why was she taking pictures in that Detroit parking lot on Monday?

That journey all started when she met videographer Joey Dillard, who videotaped the opening of the Detroit Historical Museum's exhibits on the Polish presence in Detroit.

Dr. Thaddeus Radzilowski, president of St. Mary's College, knew of Palazzolo's plan to write a book and asked her to be honorary curator for the exhibit.

Research led her to drive past the old dance halls where



The surviving members of Stas Wisniack's 'Club Polka' band gathered on Monday at the site of the former Tip Top Inn.

her father and his fellow musicians played. They were crumbling ruins in neighborhoods too poor to have preserved the buildings.

"I thought, in 10 or 15 years, these dance halls will all be gone," Palazzolo said. "I felt I had to bring them to light."

She hired Dillard, who works full time for

Ford Motor Co.

"I have full confidence he's going to bring this about," she said.

Monday's taping brought together band members at the site of the former Tip Top Inn, where Stas Wisniack's Club Polka orchestra was discovered. The band played for several years; Wisniack was



Author Laurie Gomulka Palazzolo and Stas Wisniack look over a mock up of a book about Polish musicians in her Farmington home.

employed by the station for 10 years, including stints on the Soupy Sales and Uncle Harry shows.

Original band members included Harry (Witczak) Walker, Art Buczkowski, Paul Bronchak, Wally Greszlik and Paul Onachuk. Palazzolo's Uncle Wally Gomulka, Bob Lymperski and Clem (Napierkowski) Napier joined later as replacements.

The musicians, many of whom were graduates of Cass Tech High School, were so dedicated, Palazzolo said, they often missed their own children's weddings to play at other events.

But with the advent of rock 'n' roll, polka music (which actually originated in Bohemia) moved to the sidelines in popular culture.

The times changed as well,

Wisniack recalled. Families stopped the tradition of having the bands play as the bride left her parents' home to go to church; the band inadvertently advertised to thieves that no one would be in the house for hours.

The big Polish picnic common in Warsaw, Liberty and other parks replaced the wedding as the "big event" for Polish musicians. But these, too, died out when crime hit the neighborhoods.

"They would advertise them as 50 cents a carload," Wisniack said. "The music would stop when it got that and you'd have these hoodlums come in from other areas."

The soon-to-be octogenarian still plays his accordion, but mostly at retirement home dances, yet another reason Wisniack feels it's important to capture the history of musicians like Stas and her father.

"It really is a cultural phenomena that's breathing its last," she said.

For more information, go to www.horoman-detroit.com or contact Palazzolo at (248) 477-8518.

lpalaz@pc.homecom.net | (248) 477-5450

Polish-American musician has music in his blood

BY JONI HUBBARD
STAFF WRITER

Stas Wisniack's fingers still fly over the keys of his accordion and when he plays, his eyes close as he loses himself in the music.

"My mother said I used to sit under her old fashioned Singer sewing machine...singing and chewing noodles," said Wisniack, who will turn 80 in May.

He started playing the accordion by ear at the age of six and was an avid student two years later.

"I won a Wurlitzer contest when I was 12," Wisniack said. "They gave me a week's engagement at the Fox, a new accordion and lots of publicity."

Historian and author Laurie Palazzolo, whose book *From Man Documents* Wisniack and other Polish American musicians in Detroit, said a youthful start

to his career wasn't the accordionist's only unusual accomplishment.

"He was the first and only student at Detroit Institute of Musical Arts to be given recognition as having an accordion as his major," she said.

"I was studying the saxophone and clarinet," Wisniack recalled. "I was prepared to be denied."

Once they heard him play, however, Institute officials were convinced.

He formed his first band at age 9. Wisniack's musical career was interrupted by a stint in the Armed Forces, but when he returned, things picked right up again.

While playing at the Tip Top Inn on Proctor in Detroit, television found Wisniack and his musical compatriots.

The Club Polka band had a spot on WXYZ-TV's lineup for about four years, on Thursday nights at 8 p.m.

"It was very popular with Ukrainians, Czechs, Germans... most of the ethnic groups," said Palazzolo.

When Club Polka ended, Wisniack stayed with WXYZ and became a popular guest on Soupy Sales and Uncle Harry's Club shows.

"He took many pies in the face on Soupy Sales," Palazzolo laughed.

Wisniack has a serious side as well.

"I did some concert work for the Hamtramck Symphony," he said. "I loved my classical music. Of course, you couldn't make a living at it."

The job at the TV station allowed him to "freelance," which meant playing for traditional events. Polish weddings were the big events early on and the band played from beginning until end.

"My longest job was 24 hours," Wisniack said. "Started 8 a.m. Saturday and

ended up 8 a.m. on Sunday. That's back when the girls in the dime store were making \$25 a week, and I made \$24 in one night. I figured, 'That's for me.'"

Holding down full-time employment and playing nights and weekends kept the musicians away from their families, but no one ever complained.

"All I knew was that was the right thing to do," Wisniack said. "I didn't stop to question what their feelings were. If it was something that was an illegal procedure I would, but if it was right, that was all that mattered."

Palazzolo said all the musicians she profiled felt the same way.

"This music was in their blood. To have them stop playing their music would be like having them stop breathing."

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