

POLKA PASSION HOLLYWOOD CLUB'S ANNUAL DANCE FESTIVAL HELPS PEOPLE UNDERSTAND POLISH CULTURE AND GET IN TOUCH WITH THEIR ROOTS

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The announcement from the bandstand at a recent Food and Polka Festival in Hollywood told the whole story. "Someone has been dancing so hard, they lost the heel to their shoe," said one of the event's organizers as she held up the broken part.

"Polka music is happy music for happy people," explained Al Panasuk of Hollywood, the First Vice President of the Polish American Club of Hollywood. "We have people come here from all over south Florida just to hear the music and dance."

Panasuk was talking about the 13th annual festival that attracted several hundred Polish residents and friends for an afternoon of dancing and ethnic foods. The event was held on February 23 at the club's facility on Stirling Road in Hollywood.

The festival is part of the club's efforts to help the community know and understand Polish culture, according to Tom Zigmunt of Hollywood, the club's president.

"People come because they like the lively music and the like the beat," said Charles Muchnicki of Fort Lauderdale, the club's Second Vice President. "Many of the people here are snowbirds who like the music and meeting friends."

Ed and Maryann Motyka of Vero Beach are typical of those who say that polka music has played an important role in their life. "We met at a polka dance in Massachusetts, said Maryann who is Lithuanian. "Now, we travel all around the country to go to polka dances," she said.

"You'll find a lot of Polish communities in the middle of the country, but polka dancing has lost out along the East Coast," explained Ed who is of Polish descent. "We are musical people and we like the good, happy music."

Aficionados even point to the psychological and medical benefits of a good polka band. "It makes you feel good," said Muchnicki. "If you are down, it gives you a lift. Some people look for an escape in nicotine or booze, but good polka music is like good medicine."

Most of the dancers at the recent festival appeared to be in their 50's or older. That absence of younger community members is a concern to some.

"It has a lot to do with the family not being as strong as it used to be," explained Roseann Pena, 42 of Plantation, one of the youngest persons at the festival. "Many are not sticking to their heritage."

“While searching for my roots, I saw the sign outside of the club and stopped in,” she remembered. “They took me back to the kitchen and gave me some pierogi,” she said, describing a type of pastry filled with potatoes, sauerkraut, cheese, meat or fruit.

“I am proud of being Polish,” said Pena. “Coming to this is one way of keeping my roots. I connect through the music and the food.”

Typical foods are the specialty of Gene and Janina Horaczek of Pembroke Pines. “Pierogi is a traditional food,” Janina explained. “It’s sort of like a dumpling. We made 100 dozen to sell at the festival.”

The couple also oversaw the making of 140 dozen chrusiki, small dough cakes sprinkled with powdered sugar. Other foods available at the festival included kilbasa (a type of sausage), sauerkraut, potato pancakes and cabbage rolls.

Gene Horaczek also laments the decline in interest among the younger generation. “They don’t make this kind of food at home,” he said. “But, they come here and they can’t eat enough of it.”

Gene said that the club also sponsors Saturday evening dinner dances between New Years Day and Easter where he prepares and sells the typical food.

While there is a concern about customs dying out, bandleader Bill Borek said that polka music will live forever. Joining many others at the festival in describing the polka as “happy music for happy people,” he said, “You can’t listen without tapping your feet or clapping your hands.” Borek estimated that he has led his band at 5,500 presentations over the past 50 years. He is a retired insurance agent who is now retiring from band leading and was honored at the recent festival.

Borek agreed that Polish customs are dying among younger citizens. “I was born Polish, but today I’m American,” he said. “The great melting pot has melted and the ethnicity of the country is fading. No one is explaining their culture to their kids.”

The bandleader said that he believes that eventually Polish celebrations will become isolated events, similar to St. Patrick’s day for the Irish or Oktoberfest for the country’s German population.

For now, polka bands often mix polka with other forms of music, in part to draw a younger crowd to the dances. “With that kind of mix, anybody can come and enjoy it,” he said.

Polka began as a type of folk music in Poland, Borek explained, and came over to the United States with immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

“It’s making a big comeback in Poland right now as a folkloric expression,” he said. Meanwhile, he believes that the music is improving in the United States. “It’s more sophisticated, better composed and played on better instruments.”

The Polish American Club of Hollywood was organized 27 years ago and joins other clubs in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, Vero Beach and Lake Worth in helping South Florida’s xxx,000 Poles enjoy an afternoon of happy music for happy people.

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