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The Polish Heritage Society meets at the Polish Falcons at 6:00 pm on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October.

The Polish Heritage Society publishes this newsletter monthly. Submit story ideas and content contributions to Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to: phsgrandrapids@gmail.com

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## PHS Founder Edward Alan Symans: An Eyewitness to Polish History

By Richard Panek

This year marks the 63rd anniversary of the 1963 incorporation of the Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids. A few years ago, a PHS member attended one of the board meetings and distributed a copy of a Grand Rapids Press article about one of the society's founders, and its first president, Edward Alan Symans. The article, written sometime in the 1970's by Press Columnist Gerald Elliot, disclosed some fascinating details about this man and his life experiences.

Last year, Mary Mancewicz, daughter of the late PHS member, Theresa Palaszek-Mancewicz donated boxes of PHS related documents to the society. These records included PHS cultural event programs from the 1960's and 1970's as well as a 1974 by-laws and member directory booklet. The member directory includes a list of PHS presidents dating from 1963 through 1974. According to the booklet, Edward Alan Symans held the position of PHS president in 1963 and 1966 as well. Further research through the internet uncovered additional details about this most fascinating Polish-American from Grand Rapids, Michigan.

He was born Edward Alan Symanski in Grand Rapids on May 8, 1903, and attended St Isidore's Church, one of 5 children born to

Stanley and Grace (Zdroj) Szymanski. Symanski's father was born in Poland but came to America as an infant when less than one year old, while his mother Grace Zdroj was born in Grand Rapids. Symans attended Grand Rapids Catholic Central High School and from there he went to junior college followed by Marquette University in Milwaukee, where he majored in journalism. His studies ultimately took him to graduate school at the University of Warsaw, where he studied philology which is the study of language in written historical sources — essentially the study of where language, literature, and history meet. This scholarship would suit him well in the career path that he ultimately followed.

His life activities as a Polish-American poet, diplomat, and cultural activist, like the discipline of philology, were interwoven into a unique life story. Symans was a career diplomat who served in the United States Foreign Service for 30 years. He joined the Foreign Service in 1927 and was assigned to various posts around the world, including Poland, where he spent most of his diplomatic career. He was the vice consul in Warsaw from 1930 to 1934 and the consul in Poznan from 1934 to 1939 (during which time he changed his surname from Symanski to Symans).



*Edward Alan Symans, the first president of the PHS*

Symans' diplomatic duties included travel to Berlin, Moscow, Vladivostok, Ankara, Buenos Aires, and Beirut. During his career he learned to speak fluent Russian, Polish (which he first had heard from his parents), French, Spanish and German.

His role in the Foreign Service was mainly to represent the interests and policies of the United States government in his host countries, as well as to provide consular services and assistance to American citizens abroad. He also reported on political, eco-

*(Continued on page 2)*

## Polish Heritage Society Event Schedule

**PHS Board Meeting**, Monday, March 16th, 6:00 pm at Polish Falcons - 957 Fulton St SW, followed by Festival Planning at 6:30. All PHS members are encouraged to attend. Bar will be open.

**Rozmowa Polish Language Club**, March 24th 7:00 pm, Kosciuszko Hall - 935 Park St SW, Grand Rapids.

**PHS Scholarship Application Deadline**, April 15th, (See membership news and events on page 5 for details on this and other happenings or go to events calendar on the PHS website).

(Symans continued from page 1)

conomic, social, and cultural developments in his areas of responsibility and maintained relations with local officials and organizations.

Symans personally witnessed the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 which included the destruction of the American embassy where he was posted, and he helped many Polish refugees escape to Romania. He also supported the Polish resistance movement and advocated for Polish sovereignty after World War II when he was the consul general in Krakow from 1945 to 1947<sup>1</sup>. He received the Medal of Freedom from President Dwight D. Eisenhower for his distinguished foreign service and several honors from the Polish government and people, such as the Order of Polonia Restituta and the Gold Cross of Merit<sup>1,2</sup>.

Symans was married to Therese de Fisse, whom he first met in Paris in 1938, and they had two children. Their first daughter Mireille was born in Buenos Aires on June 1, 1945 and died, after only a week's illness, of bulbar polio in Beirut, Lebanon in 1952. Their second daughter Chantal was born in Paris in 1950 and

currently resides in West Michigan.

Retiring from the Foreign Service in 1960, he returned to Grand Rapids, where he became a founder and president of the Polish Arts Society (now known as the Polish Heritage Society) of Grand Rapids in 1963. He had a talent for writing and was first published by Harriet Monroe in her *Poetry* magazine in 1928, and then in the *Forge, Midwestern Review* and *Commonweal*. He also published three volumes of poetry: *The Golden Horn* (1948), *The White Eagle* (1966), and *The Polish Phoenix* (1981). His wife Therese M. Symans, shared his interest in Polish culture and history. He died in Grand Rapids in 1991 and was buried at Resurrection Cemetery<sup>1</sup>.

Some of his reports and correspondence make up a significant historical record and reside in the Edward Alan Symanski papers collection at the University of Minnesota Archives. According to the Archives website, his collection contains letters and documents related to his diplomatic service in Poland and other countries, as well as his personal and family affairs. This includes letters from Symans to his wife Therese

during his assignment in Warsaw in 1939, describing the Nazi invasion and his efforts to help Polish refugees<sup>1</sup>.

Another source of his reports or correspondence is his book *From the Fourth Province* (1952), which is a collection of poems and essays based on his experiences and observations as a diplomat in Poland and other parts of Europe<sup>2,3</sup>. The book includes some of his official reports to the State Department, as well as personal letters to his friends and relatives. It includes a report on the Polish resistance movement in 1945, as well as a letter to his brother-in-law about the post-war situation in Germany<sup>3</sup>.

In addition to founding the Polish Heritage Society in 1963, Symans worked closely with Grand Valley State Colleges (now GVSU) in its exchange programs with Poland. He was also a member of the Aquinas College Development Committee and associated with the Immigration Resource Center at the University of Minnesota which is a repository for ethnic papers. He was a member of the National Council of the Kosciuszko Foundation, the Institute of Polish Arts and Sciences of New York and contributed to the Insti-

tute's publication *Polish Review*. He was a member of the Polish Historical Association of Chicago and wrote for its publications on the Poles in Grand Rapids and elsewhere.

Edward Alan Symans lived a life that beautifully bridged his Polish heritage and American identity. A prolific writer, poet, translator, and historian of the Polish-American experience, he reflects the classic Polish-American story: devotion to family and heritage, service to the United States, and a lifelong commitment to preserving the cultural legacy of Poland in American life.

(1) Edward Alan Symanski papers - University of Minnesota. <https://archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/6/resources/4621> Accessed 5/26/2023.

(2) Edward Alan Symans | Open Library. [https://openlibrary.org/authors/OL5144503A/Edward\\_Alain\\_Symans](https://openlibrary.org/authors/OL5144503A/Edward_Alain_Symans) Accessed 5/26/2023.

(3) From the fourth province (1952 edition) | Open Library. [https://openlibrary.org/books/OL16870745M/From\\_the\\_fourth\\_province](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL16870745M/From_the_fourth_province) Accessed 5/26/2023.

## The Rise and Fall of Bingo at St. Adalbert Parish in Grand Rapids: A Polish-American Story

By Paulette Longwell

Was Bingo ever a popular game in Poland? In Grand Rapids currently, it is a game played by children at birthday parties, seniors at activity centers or gamblers in Michigan casinos. There was a time in the past when bingo was very popular here in Grand Rapids. As a fund raiser for Catholic parishes, it was enjoyed by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

Prior to the 1970s, many churches, veterans' halls, and ethnic clubs (including Polish American parishes) quietly ran bingo nights. These events were toler-

ated socially but not formally legal. Michigan's constitution prohibited most forms of gambling, and there was no statewide system for licensing or oversight.

By the late 1960s, charitable groups were pressuring lawmakers to create a legal pathway so they could raise money openly



St. Adalbert School

and safely.

As a Catholic school junior high student, I helped in a very small way for bingo to become legalized in Michigan. I have two membership cards from the Saints Peter and Paul Social and Fundraising Club from the time when I attended St. Adalbert School in 1970 to 1972. Activities of the club included advocating for the Michigan Legislature to support a bill legalizing bingo, and one way we did this was by writing letters to support the legislation.

Michigan's path to legal charitable bingo was centered on one

major piece of legislation: the Traxler-McCauley-Law-Bowman Bingo Act of 1972. This act created the legal framework that still governs charitable gaming today.

The Bingo Act was amended several times—in 1976, 1981, and 1999—to adjust prize limits, tighten reporting requirements, and regulate newer forms of charitable gaming. Once the Bingo Act took effect, parishes could no longer run bingo informally. They now needed a state license with a designated chairperson-supported by trained volunteers. The law also mandated strict rec-

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

ord-keeping, compliance with State-set prize limits as well as the regular reporting of all revenue and expenses related to Bingo.

For Polish American parishes—many of which already had strong organizational cultures through societies like the Polish Falcons, Rosary Societies, and parish committees—this structure fit naturally. They were already used to running festivals, dinners, and raffles with precision.

“St. Adalbert's Parish held its first bingo game at 2:00 P.M. on Sunday, July 22, 1973. Organized and managed by the energetic, devoted, and capable Mr. Jerome Bajdek along with many assistants, it began modestly as an effort to raise additional money for the parish general fund.” according to Parish Council minutes from September 26th of that year. “...net proceeds, less prize money, was \$3,300, and out of this was purchased 152 chairs, 8 tables, all equipment initial supplies, equipment, and enough supplies for the next twelve months.”

From that point on, church records stated that all proceeds would be clear profit. Praise was also noted in meeting minutes on the “excellent job, good service, (and) comfortable arrangements” provided by the workers. “The only change since 1973 is that these conditions have gotten even better, making St. Adal-



*Pauline Raczkiewicz played bingo regularly.*

bert's weekly bingo games among the most successful on the West Side, usually netting over \$1,000 per week.”

When bingo games began, I was a high school student. I remember my Grandma Pauline Raczkiewicz played bingo frequently. Sometimes I went with her to St. Adalbert's but also to the various other church halls that offered bingo. The participants sat at long lunchroom tables hunched over their multiple thick cardboard bingo cards. The more cards that a person played, the better the odds, but having too many cards was ineffective if you didn't have time to adequately scan them before the next number was called.

The caller stood in front of the group near the cash and other prizes and would select a random ball from a spinner and read the number and letter (“B1!”) The players would then quickly scan the rows for that number and letter. If it was found, they covered the square with a flat plastic

disk. A later innovation was a bingo dauber, a plastic bottle with a thin ink solution used to mark the square on paper bingo cards. (We called it a dabber.) If the necessary squares were covered to win, the player would yell, “Bingo!” and one of the volunteers would hurry over to help check their numbers.

In 1981 during the Jubilee celebrations in September, bingo was played in the multi-purpose room of St. Adalbert School during the weekend festival. The Ladies Auxiliary of St. Adalbert also sponsored bingo games at the Michigan Veteran Home.

The game was a great way to spend time with other people, raise money for a good cause, and experience the excitement of trying to win prizes. Like many Polish heritage parishes across Michigan, the school used bingo revenue to help subsidize tuition, support athletics, and maintain aging buildings. The game was not merely entertainment; it was a resource that kept Catholic education accessible for working class immigrant families. Over time however, bingo was phased out at many Catholic parishes. When the school closed in 2007, there was no longer the interest for this type of fundraising.

At that time also, the neighborhood itself was changing. As Polish families moved to the suburbs, the tight-knit ethnic

enclave that once supported parish life began to disperse. The core bingo audience—older Polish American women and retired factory workers—dwindled. Michigan's casino boom accelerated the decline. With the rise of Gun Lake, Soaring Eagle, and Detroit's casinos, avid players gravitated toward larger jackpots, amenities, and the social atmosphere that parish halls could no longer match.

The 2010 statewide smoking ban dealt another blow. For many longtime players, bingo had always been paired with coffee, cigarettes and conversation. When smoking was prohibited in parish buildings, attendance dropped further.

Behind the scenes, volunteer burnout became impossible to ignore. Running bingo required dozens of helpers each week—managing cash, selling cards, handling security, and staying late into the night. As the older generation retired and younger families moved away, the volunteer base thinned to a handful of exhausted regulars.

Over time, increased state gaming regulations and diocesan direction to move away from gambling-based fundraising made bingo impractical. St. Adalbert, like many Polish parishes in Michigan, shifted its energy to mission or culture focused events, like parish auctions, festivals, and heritage dinners—that better reflected its mission and identity but still raised funds from food sales and raffles.

## PHS Board Elections Coming up in May

The Polish Heritage Society will conduct its annual board election on Monday, May 18 at the Polish Falcons Hall to fill three officer seats and three director seats. Doors to the hall at 957 Fulton St will open at 5:30 p.m., the normal board meeting will take place

from 6 to 6:30 p.m. and then the doors will be locked promptly at 6:30 p.m. to conduct the election. No one will be admitted after 6:30 p.m. while the election is conducted.

Lifetime members and members who have paid their annual dues

are eligible to vote.

Up for election are the positions of 2nd Vice President, Treasurer, Corresponding Secretary and 3 Director positions. All incumbents have the option to run again and plan on serving an additional term. These

positions may be challenged and if you have questions on the responsibilities of open positions please feel free to reach out for additional information or submit a nomination to the Polish Heritage Society at [phsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:phsgrandrapids@gmail.com).

Polish Roman Catholic Union of America  
**Malbork Dance Group**

Invites you to Our 10<sup>th</sup> Annual

# Recital



*Once Upon a*

*Polish Night...*

Tickets \$10 purchasable at the door. Cash, Venmo, Check.

Kids under 18 free.

Saturday  
March 21st, 2026  
2:00 PM

West Catholic High School  
1801 Bristol Ave NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504



## Polish Heritage Society Membership News and Events

By Marilyn Lignell

Hello members. For a short few days, I thought we were heading into spring, but this morning as I write this it is snowing and back to 19 degrees. That gives me an excuse to stay cozied up indoors and prepare membership cards to go out in your April newsletter. If you have not renewed your Polish Heritage Society membership, please do so at this time to avoid a lapse in membership. As a reminder, if you have moved and need to update your information this is a perfect opportunity. Simply use the QR code on the back of this newsletter to go directly to the membership renewal site.

This month, Matt Szukalski and Grazyna Castillo became lifetime members. Welcome aboard and Witamy!



Clara Grace Palmer

Congratulations to lifetime member Hadley Palmer and her husband Harrison on the birth of Clara Grace. Clara was born on February 9 weighing 5lbs 14oz and measuring 18 inches long. Clara also made lifetime member Millie Combs a first time Babcia!

PHS Director Marzanna Butryn is presenting a series of programs promoting Polish culture in Grand Rapids. Marzanna is an

educator and linguist with broad expertise in Polish language, culture and cuisine among other areas. Last month she presented a lecture on Polish history at the Grand Rapids Public Library. This month she continues her series at the library with the following event:

Free lecture: How Polish Generals Shaped American History

Friday, March 7, 12:00-1:00 PM

Location: Grand Rapids Public Library

Attend an engaging lecture about two remarkable Polish heroes of the American Revolutionary War:

Tadeusz Kosciuszko- Brilliant military engineer, designer of West Point fortifications, and champion of liberty and equality.

Kazimerz (Casimir) Pulaski- Known as the "Father of the American Cavalry," who sacrificed his life fighting for American independence.

Discover how their courage, leadership, and vision helped shape the foundations of the United States.

Marzanna is also repeating her Polish Cooking Class- Paczki

Saturday, March 28, 10:00 AM-1:00 PM

Locations: Sons and Daughters Hall

Celebrate Polish culinary tradition with a hands-on cooking experience!

Prepare authentic paczki dough

Learn traditional fillings

Master frying and finishing techniques

Taste freshly made Polish treats

Cost: \$30 per person

Bring your apron and your sweet tooth!

Marzanna's cooking classes have been very well received by our members and their friends. We thank her for offering her historical lectures to the public as well as the cooking classes so more people can learn about Polish culture.

Speaking of PHS board members giving back to the community, did you know that PHS Director Rosemary Maciejewski also contributes many hours of volunteer service to American Legion Post 459 and other causes? These include the Michigan Veterans Home as well as Heroes Corner.



Located at 4908 Eastern Avenue SE in Kentwood, Hero's Corner aims to give our veterans and their families a place called home.

They provide a sober drop-in space with on-site help, fellowship and social activities, even if a vet or family member just needs someone to talk to. Drop in Mon-Fri 10-6pm. Call 616-635-2768 for more information. Rosemary has been working and promoting their free community lunches for vets as well as other Hero's Corner activities. If you know of a veteran, whether they are a hero or "shero" who could benefit from Hero's Corner, tell them about it.

The PHS also encourages members to support organizations with similar missions of promoting Polish Culture. One such organization is the Grand Rapids P.R.C.U.A. Malbork Dance Group, a youth dance group that teaches traditional Polish folk dances. The

group practices Thursday nights between 6-8pm and performs at multiple events through out the area. Their next recital is taking place on Saturday, March 21 at 2:00 PM at West Catholic High School in Grand Rapids. See page 4 of this newsletter for details.

Now is the time to let students of Polish descent know about the PHS Scholarship program. Those who plan to attend or are enrolled in just about any post high school education are eligible to apply for the Scholarships.

To be eligible, applicants must:

- be of Polish American descent;
- reside in Allegan, Barry, Ionia, Kent, Montcalm, Muskegon or Ottawa county; and,
- plan to attend or currently attend an accredited 2-year trade/vocational program, 2-year community college program or 4-year college or university.

Applicants need to provide:

- the scholarship application form;
- a copy of academic transcripts that show a minimum 2.75 GPA;
- two letters of recommendation from a teacher, mentor, coach, or advisor;
- a brief statement signed by the applicant that delineates his or her Polish heritage; and,
- a 200-word essay that shares career goals and why they are deserving of a scholarship.

Applications are available online at <https://polishheritagesociety.com> or from the counseling offices at high schools or post high school institutions. Completed applications can be emailed to [phsgrandrapids@gmail.com](mailto:phsgrandrapids@gmail.com) or physically mailed to Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids, PO Box 1844, Grand Rapids MI 49501.



Join the Polish Heritage Society to receive our monthly newsletter and other benefits!

**Annual Student Membership for full-time students through college \$5**

**Annual Adult Membership \$20**

**Annual Family or Business Membership \$35**

**Lifetime Membership \$150**

**Scan the QR code with your phone camera to become a member:**



**OR BY MAIL:**

Fill out this form and send a personal check made out to the Polish Heritage Society to this address:

Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids

P.O. Box 1844

Grand Rapids MI 49501-1844

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