

The Polish Arts Club of Trenton's History

By Donna Chmara

Our Beginnings

On a cold and stormy night in the winter of 1946, Charlotte, Loretta and Frances Bielawski were attending a meeting of Klub Polski at Columbia University in New York City. On the way home, the three sisters began an animated discussion on the need for a club in their community that would celebrate the rich cultural heritage of Poland. By the time their train pulled into the Trenton station, the idea of the Polish Arts Club of Trenton was born.

On March 17, 1946, a group of Polish Americans met at the Stacy-Trent Hotel in downtown Trenton to organize the club. The charter members who started the club were: Charlotte Bielawski, Loretta Bielawski, Frances Bielawski, Venceslaus Bielawski, Helen Jasienski, Stanley Kostrzewa, John Krol, Stella Krupa, Edward Krupa, Edward Krupa, Frank Krupp, Josephine Nied, Josephine Odorczyk, Helen Skrobiszewski, Lillian Skrobiszewski, Josephine Sondej, Valeria Wenczel, Lee Wojciechowski, Stephanie Winowicz and Stanley Winowicz.

The club selected the following as its first officers: Frank Krupp, President; Stanley Winowicz, Vice President; Lee Wojciechowski, Secretary; Dr. Robert Zielinski, Treasurer; Charlotte Bielawski, Program Chair; and Edward Krupa, Publicity Chair.

The founding and charter members decided the club should promote cultural, academic and social activities that represent Polish culture and through moral and financial support, it should encourage young people of Polish heritage to pursue higher education. This vision has been realized consistently and enthusiastically over the past 60 years.

Cultural, Academic and Social Activities

During the first decade, the Club sponsored lectures, musical performances, guest artists, panel discussions, and social events. Some of the highlights were a concert by pianist Marion Zarzeczna, a Chopin memorial concert on the 100th anniversary of the composer's death, and a Polish Folk Art Exhibit attended by over a thousand people. Reviving the old custom of caroling, the Club fulfilled many requests from families for carolers to appear in their homes.

The grand social event of the year and major fundraiser became the Polonaise Ball. A highlight of the balls between 1947 and 1956 was the coronation of the queen with her respective court attendants. The first queen was Emily Sawchak. Other social events included fashion shows, dinner dances, beach parties, country fairs, and Christmas parties for children and adults. In commemoration of the Club's tenth anniversary, Trenton mayor Donal J Connolly designated February 4th, 1956 the day of the Polonaise Ball, as Polish Arts Club Day of Trenton.

The next two decades saw growth and change. The coronation of the ball queen was replaced by the presentation of young debutantes. The Club became involved in civic matters that included lectures on current events and a book drive that provided hospitals and public libraries with books written in Polish or translated into English.

Social activities included summer formals, beach luaus, Halloween celebrations, a November Nocturne dinner dance, a Sadie Hawkins party, Christmas caroling, formal Christmas socials, and New Year's Eve parties.

The 1960's proved to be a productive decade. A Junior Polish Arts Club was organized for young people between ages 17 to 27. The Club also sponsored an exhibit of pre-war original Polish objet d'art and a contest to select a cover for the Polonaise Ball program book. The Club prepared educational pamphlets for the general public. Examples of two such pamphlets were, "Ignacy Jan Paderewski - Pianist, Composer and Statesman," as well as "A Thousand Years of Christianity in Poland - Poland's Millennium 966 - 1966." The Club also combined "words and music" in the Millennium concert of the Greater Trenton Symphony Orchestra. The Club held a Polish Night, which featured a lavish ethnic feast, to raise funds to buy books about Polish culture for Saint Hedwig, Saint Stanislaus and Holy Cross Schools.

In 1973, on the 500th anniversary of the birth of astronomer Nicholas Copernicus (Mikolaj Kopernik), the Club sponsored a lecture by Polish art historian and writer, Dr. Karel Estreicher, who spoke on "Cracov at the Time of Nicholas Copernicus."

In the following years, the Club sponsored performances by the Polish National Symphony Orchestra, the musical troupe Mazowsze, Polish Army Song and Dance Company, the Lubin Catholic University Choir, and Wroclaw Polytechnic Institute Choir, Saint John the Baptist Cathedral Choir of Warsaw, the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Cappella Crocovienses Choir from Krakow, and the Polish Theatre Group. It also sponsored Polish teachers at an English language conference in the United States.

The new millennium brought new activity. In 2001, the Club sponsored concerts by the Academic Chorus of the Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice, Poland. The concerts were given at St. Hedwig's Church and at the Church of the Holy Cross. That same year, two of our members gave presentations on Polish literature at the Barnes and Noble bookstore in Lawrenceville. For several years, the Club sponsored plays about Nicholas Copernicus and Tadeusz Kosciuszko at local schools. In 2003, during "Polish Day" at the Chapin School, Club members put up exhibits, handed out fact sheets on Poland, and taught Polish history and literature. We also represented the Polish community when the theme of Hamilton Township's Septemberfest was "Coming to America."

The Scholarship Program

In keeping with the goal of encouraging young people to pursue higher education, the Club has awarded over \$160,000 in scholarship grants to worthy and qualified students of Polish extraction. Each year, we typically present scholarships in the value of \$1,000 each, to ten students. As part of the 60th celebration, and due to our members' hard work in fundraising, we are awarded thirteen \$1,000 scholarships.

Over the decades, members have devoted themselves to expand the scholarship program to its present level. Hedwig Golembiewski was the first and only recipient to receive the sum of \$300 in 1947. By 1954, the amount was raised to \$500. In conjunction with its educational program, the Club held an open house for college students in 1949 and sponsored a literary contest in 1953. By 1956, the Club awarded two scholarships in the value of \$500 each. In 1963, the scholarship amount was raised to \$1,000 for one student per year. In 1967, the Club awarded \$1,500 in scholarships and in 1968, two \$1,000 scholarships were awarded. By 1976, the program had grown to six recipients of \$500 scholarships.

To reach today's generous level, club members participate in a variety of fundraising activities. The Polonaise Ball is our premier event but fundraising continues during the year through our Valentine's Dance, and through projects such as the sale of 50/50 tickets at the Trenton Thunder games, and the sale of Polish hand blown Christmas ornaments, Heritage Cookbooks, poinsettias and T shirts.

Looking to the Future

As names and faces change, the importance of celebrating our cultural inheritance remains constant. The Club has been blessed recently with an influx of new members with energy, dedication and good ideas. They will carry on the torch.

We are grateful to the founding members, the charter members, past officers and past members for the legacy they have created. We stand on their shoulders and they remain our role models as we continue to reach out to our greatest resource, the community we live in and serve.