Which among our Polish Women in Western Pennsylvania is the most beautiful?

Matylda Zygmunt and the Polish Beauty Contest of 1930

By Dorothy Gray

In an old photograph album, its black pages beginning to crumble and the white ink of the inscriptions fading, there is a newspaper clipping showing a photograph of my mother, Matylda Zygmunt. The caption reads “Miss Allegheny” and the name under the photo is “Panna Matylda Zygmunt” with a few Polish words visible underneath. In my father’s hand, the year “1930” has been added. I remember this clipping from my childhood when we sometimes looked through this album, which was begun by my mother during her teenage years in Braddock, Pennsylvania. When I decided to preserve the old album and identify more of the people in the photographs, the “Miss Allegheny” clipping intrigued me; I wanted to know the story behind it. What did this title mean to my mother? Had there been a Polish beauty contest in 1930?
My parents died early, my mother just before my fifth birthday and my father 16 years later in 1964, so I began by asking other relatives and family friends what they remembered. Aunt Leona, who was 13 years old in 1930, thought the contest was sponsored by a Polish organization, but she couldn’t remember much about her sister’s title. Matylda’s sister Sylvia was only 3 years old in 1930, and my uncles Henry and Tadzu (Ted) were deceased by the time I started my search.

In the fall of 2003, I visited Stephanie Tracz, an old friend of my mother and a lifelong Braddock resident. The Tracz family lived on Second Street during the 1920s and ’30s, around the corner from the Zygmunt family home at 201 Talbot Avenue, and they knew each other well. When Stephanie’s mother died in 1930 after a long illness, it was my grandmother, Cecelia Zygmunt, who stepped in to help the Tracz children. Stephanie, 20 years old then with six brothers and sisters—all but one younger than she—said it was Mrs. Zygmunt who made sure they had enough to eat, showed the girls how to sew, and looked after them. “She was like another mother to us,” Stephanie explained. Stephanie had dropped out of school in the 10th grade to help support the family, getting a job at Donohue’s Market and Cafeteria in Pittsburgh. Later, at age 26, she was hired as truant officer for the Braddock School District, a job she held until she retired at age 65. “It was a political job,” Stephanie said, “and luckily for me, politics in Braddock never changed!”

Stephanie and I spent a Sunday afternoon looking at the old photographs in Matylda’s album. Stephanie identified many of the people and reminisced about life back then. Having lost my mother so early, I am always intrigued by descriptions of her and what she was like. Aunt Leona had told me many stories about my mother, remembering her older sister as a serious, studious girl who liked to read and play violin and piano. Matylda’s WWII correspondence to her brother Henry, who saved all the family letters, also gave me a glimpse of her, but by then she was a young wife and mother writing about family life during the war.

Stephanie told me about Matylda’s teenage years and gave me another view of her as a young woman who loved to dance and who was involved in the social whirl of young people in Braddock. Stephanie remembered Matylda’s “Miss Allegheny” title, and that the Polish beauty contest was sponsored by the Pittsburczanin, the major Polish language newspaper in the Pittsburgh area at that time.

Once I had the name of the sponsoring newspaper, my next step was finding out whether the Pittsburczanin was microfilmed and archived. The staff at the Library & Archives of the History Center provided this information, and at the Hillman Library in Oakland, I found the Pittsburczanin, The Polish Daily Pittburgher, on microfilm. It had begun publication in 1920 as a daily, became a weekly in 1933, then a semi-monthly paper until 1976 when its run ended. The masthead from a 1930s edition boasts, “The Leading American Daily Printed in the Polish Language, The Oldest Polish Daily in the State of Pennsylvania.” It was published at the Pittsburgh Polish Daily Publishing Company, 2637 Penn Avenue.

Knowing just enough Polish to identify the headlines of the beauty contest articles, I traced the pageant’s beginning to August 7, 1929. The articles extend into June 1930, when the contest came to an end. Stephanie Tracz and I spent an afternoon with copies of these articles, she translating enough of the story along with her memories of the contest excitement in Braddock to have me completely enchanted with this episode in my mother’s young life. When Stephanie turned to me and asked if I was planning to write the story of this beauty contest, I answered yes, especially since I could now add her wonderful memories to the tale.

Matylda Zygmunt, born in Braddock in 1910, came of age in the 1920s in the middle of the huge social changes in the United States that began after WWI. Young women like Matylda no longer wore the corsets and long skirts of their mothers. Instead the fashion was short dresses that hung straight from the shoulders just to the knees, sometimes with arms bared, all the easier to dance the wild, flapping dances of the day. The word “flapper” came into use to describe these women. By the end of the ’20s, most were using cosmetics, making the industry the fourth largest business in the United States.
behind cars, movies, and bootlegged liquor. Bobbed hair was considered by some to be a sign of dangerous radicalism, but young women loved the look. Dating became popular, as opposed to receiving callers at home like the previous generation had done, and now young people drove everywhere in automobiles, including the popular stripped-down Model T Ford.

In Matylda's album there are numerous photos of her and friends at picnics and Polish Falcon athletic events. A 1929 photograph shows her at the wheel of a 1926 Pierce Arrow, her brother Tadzu sitting in the back seat. The family story as remembered by my brother Joe is that this automobile was given to Tadzu and Henry Zygmunt by an old friend of their father. My favorite photo in the album is dated 1928 and shows a group of young men, including my father, posing on a Braddock street. Matylda labeled this one, "Why Girls Leave Home."

In 1921, the first "Miss America" contest was held in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Promoted as an athletic contest for young women, it shocked the public by having the young women parade across the stage in one-piece bathing suits — modest by today's standards but revealing in 1921. It was a moneymaking scheme devised by business people and the local newspaper to promote the Atlantic City resort; they scheduled the pageant for early September to keep the public there past Labor Day. The idea of "Miss America" swept the country, and by 1926, the contest winner made $100,000 in appearance fees, more than the President of the United States. Religious groups and women's clubs, along with some patrons of the resort, complained about the "loose morals" of the contestants. These protests and financial problems caused the pageant to shut down from 1929 until 1932. But by then, pageants were popular with the public, along with the idea that an ordinary, good-looking girl could become a local celebrity.

The beauty contest craze spread all over the country; a Pittsburgh Press article from July 1929, shows a photo of Dorothy Gildernow, crowned as "Queen of the Rivers" in Pittsburgh.

The Pittsburgh announced the beginning of its beauty contest on August 7, 1929, by posing the question: "Which among our Polish Women in Western Pennsylvania is the most beautiful?" Young Polish women were asked to prepare themselves for this competition that would begin with local contests held in "all Polish settlements in Western Pennsylvania." The goal of the contest was to find "the most beautiful Polish woman in all aspects, not just physical beauty, but including her soul," so to that end, they would not present a parade of women in swimsuits during the contest, a spectacle they believed degrading to women. The article also states that although beauty contests had recently become stylish and popular among "Americans," the Polish beauty contest would be different, "showing outsiders that even in this land, we do not yield to the ways of other nationalities unless we surpass them."

This attitude of immigrant Poles being separate from "Americans" did not surprise me. My grandfather, Frank Zygmunt, had written and published a book in 1917, Pamietnik Parafii Najsłodszej Serca Pana Jezusa (Memoirs of the Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish) commemorating the 20th anniver-

Top: Matylda Zygmunt at the wheel of a 1926 Pierce Arrow, Braddock, Pa., 1929.
sary of the founding of the Polish parish in Braddock. His book included a short history of Polish immigration to the United States and Braddock, and he was clear in his view that Polish immigrants were establishing “American Polonia” in the United States and would not submit to “Americanization.” He wrote about the “growth of the Polish soul” possible in America for the immigrants, who in the old country had been “bound in shackles” under the Prussian, Austrian, and Russian partitions. But at the same time, Frank Zygmunt, along with my paternal grandfather, Stanley Ulanowicz and others, established the Polish American Citizens Club of Braddock in 1910, for teaching immigrants how to become citizens, vote, and participate in American political and business life. My grandfather seemed to think that the Polish immigrants, who loved America and the freedom and opportunity it offered, could be citizens fully involved in American life yet never lose their “Polishness.” My parents’ generation, born in the United States, saw themselves as Americans of Polish heritage, or Polish-Americans as we say now. My father explained this view when he talked about the reasons behind changing our family name from Ulanowicz to Lance in the 1940s. He said his parents struggled to get to this country so that their children would be Americans, and I remember being instructed to say, when asked about my nationality, that I was an American of Polish descent.

I began to see the beauty contest story in this same light, as one of the bridges that led the Polish immigrant community further along the road to Americanization even as they protested that they would not go.

In 1929, Matylda Zygmunt, at age 19, was the manager of the bookkeeping department of Zarsky & Braun Jewelry Store in Braddock. Her friend Stephanie Tracz described her fun-loving nature:

Matylda was a social butterfly, always liked to be in the center of things and was very popular. She was active in the Polish Falcons and entered many of the athletic events. The Zygmunt house at 201 Talbot was a beehive of activity, a happy place with people coming and going, ... Henry would be playing the piano in the parlor and the young people, the friends of Henry, Matylda, and Tadzu, would be dancing in the front hall, all the popular dances of the day.

Matylda loved to socialize and according to Stephanie was:

always going off to a dance somewhere, wearing beautiful clothes that she or her mother made. I remember her in the dining room sewing a dress real fast so it would be ready for Saturday night at Kennywood Park. Oh, they went to every dance. There were lots of groups. There were the Falcons and other dance groups, and the Salvation Army hall. Braddock was a very lively place. I think your mother was meant to move fast because she had so much to do before she died.

Stephanie remembered all the excitement about the Polish beauty contest in Braddock and that Matylda was eager to win the title: “You had to buy the newspaper to get the ballot to vote, and Matylda was going around asking friends and neighbors to vote for her. The contest was very popular in the Polish community in Braddock, and there was a lot of talk about who was entering and who was pretty enough to win!”

According to the rules of the contest, a young woman could nominate herself or be nominated by others. Voting was by ballots printed daily in the *Pittsburczanin* from 10 up to 250 votes, depending on when they were printed — obviously a way to get people to subscribe to the paper or buy it (for three cents a copy) to get the most valuable ballots. Braddock businesses that agreed to sponsor the contest and provide cash prizes also had ballots available with a
store purchase, and these businesses were frequently mentioned in the contest articles, a form of free advertising: the Pittsburczanin was using American marketing strategy to promote the contest and their newspaper at the same time.11

The Braddock contest articles indicate that 23 young women were nominated as contestants. Among the businesses in Braddock sponsoring the contest and providing prizes were Home Furniture Company, The Ladies Store, Shapiro Company, Stanley Studio, Pogorzelski Pharmacy, Wardzinski Grocery & Meat, and Zarsky & Braun Jewelry Store.12

Later in August 1929, the Pittsburczanin announced the leading contestants from Braddock and the ballot count for each young woman. At the beginning of the month, Matylda had 100 votes, but by the end of August was listed as having 10,080 — in second place in the Braddock contest with Aldona Moricz in first with only 200 more.

By September, Matylda was the first place contestant. As the Braddock contest drew to a close that November, the newspaper reported the competition was tight, but still named Matylda in first place, with Miss Josefina Wardzinska and Miss Aldona Moricz close behind.

As the final votes came in, a celebration dance was planned for Saturday, November 16, at the Polish Sokol (Falcon) Hall on Penn Street, where the winner of the “Miss Braddock” title would be announced. Braddock’s Falcon Hall is described in the announcement for the ball as the largest Polish Sokol building in America, with the celebration to take place in its “big, beautiful ballroom.” Tickets, at 50 cents per person, were available from the contestants and at the door. The “widely known and loved” orchestra of Mr. Jan Marszalka of Pittsburgh and McKees Rocks would provide the music for the evening with Polish and American dances to begin at 8:30.13

The final results of the Braddock beauty contest were not as the Pittsburczanin had predicted. Matylda Zygmunt finished in second place. In a very close race, Miss Josefa Wardzinska won the title of “Miss Braddock,” with Aldona Moricz in third.

The full-page article from November 19, 1929, features photographs of Miss Josefa Wardzinska, Miss Matylda Zygmunt, Miss Aldona Moricz, and Miss Agnieszka Kolska, the fourth place winner. Matylda’s photograph is placed noticeably at the top of the page “above the fold.” Perhaps the Pittsburczanin was trying to make it up to her for not winning the “Miss Braddock” title after they had projected her as winner since September.

At this time, the contest rules changed. In the beginning, only the winner of the “Miss Braddock” title advanced to the competition for “Miss Western Pennsylvania” and the chance to win the top prize of a trip to Poland. But as its popularity grew in Polish

An ad for the contest shows the Sokol Hall, Penn Street at Halhet Avenue. It was originally Turner Hall; the Polish Falcons purchased it in 1928 to replace one on Talbot Street. The Penn Street hall reportedly burned in 1968. University of Pittsburgh, Rare Book Library

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Panna Alicja Morab
Panna Felicja Popielnicka
Panna Agnieszka Bołka

“Contestants who have surpassed 17,500 points.”

This headline in the Pittsburczanin appeared on June 25, 1930, a few days after the Pittsburczanin Ball. Contestants who accumulated at least 17,500 votes in the run-up to the ball were eligible for the New York trip drawing (which Matylda won) and to reserve a special cabin on the Estonia for the winning contestants trip to Poland, which Matylda did not make.

University of Pittsburgh, Hillman Library

In February the Pittsburczanin announced it was sponsoring a trip to New York City for one of the contestants to board the steamship Estonia and give a report on the ship that would take the winner of the “Miss Western Pennsylvania” title to Poland for a tour of the homeland. Matylda Zygmunt won this trip in a drawing held in Pittsburgh.

The photographs in Matylda’s album show her posing with Captain Steenstrup on the Estonia, and dining at the Captain’s table. Matylda wore a dark coat with a large fur collar and cuffs. Stephanie Tracz remembered, “Yes, Matylda had a beautiful black coat with a fur collar that she bought for herself after working at the jewelry store.”

In addition to the photos taken on the Estonia, there are other photographs of New York City including Saint Patrick’s Cathedral, Wanamaker’s Department Store, and the harbor.

Matylda’s report about her trip to New York appeared in the March 7, 1930, edition of the Pittsburczanin. She wrote about the Estonia and the cabins reserved for the winner of the beauty contest as “clean, light-filled, and nice, with windows to the outside.” She told of the delicious and well-prepared dinner she enjoyed, and declared that a voyage on this ship would not be boring as two orchestras play, and that each

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evening "lively spectacles are presented." The introduction to Matylda's *Pittsburczanin* report states: "We present it without correction or editing so that everyone can see that our youth has not forgotten about Poland, and despite the fact that Miss Zygmunt was born, raised, and educated here, she managed to write her impressions beautifully in Polish." But Stephanie Tracz recalled: "I remember Matylda's father helping her write the article about her trip for the *Pittsburczanin*, because although Matylda could read and write some Polish, it was her father who helped her get everything right."

At the celebration ball, the *Pittsburczanin* announced the final results. Miss Stasia Kosmaczewska of Pittsburgh won the title "Miss Western Pennsylvania" and Miss Jadwiga Sobczak of Pittsburgh won the title of "Miss Pittsburgh." Miss Matylda Zygmunt was voted the most beautiful young Polish woman in Allegheny County and named "Miss Allegheny." In the contest articles about Matylda, she is described as "generally well liked, charitable and quiet, and enjoys immense admiration in large Polish public circles in Braddock" and is "one of the most zealous members of the Sokol nest in Braddock." 

Stephanie talked about her memories of my mother and father in the early 1930s: "Your father was a shy man; he was not a dancer, but he had to learn to keep up with Matylda. When Matylda fell in love with Joe, she fell hard, and I remember her saying that they were not going to have children; they would travel and always exercise to keep physically fit. Then they got married and all of a sudden Matylda was desperate to have a baby. But Joey didn’t come along until 1937 and then the three girls came." As we looked at a family photograph from 1947, Stephanie remarked, "How proud and happy Matylda looks in this photo. She loved being the mother of her children." 

Stephanie remembered seeing Matylda shortly before she died: "I saw her in the 5&10 in Braddock and she was looking tired and pale. My sister Helen, who was a student nurse at Braddock Hospital, took care of Matylda after she went to the hospital."

My mother died of kidney failure secondary to diabetes mellitus on June 11, 1948. The death notice in the *Pittsburczanin* describes Matylda as "a flower in the meadow" and states that "her loss is mourned beyond her family, by all of Poland, among whom she enjoyed great popularity." Her name in the death notice is "Mrs. Matylda Ulanowicz-Lance," reflecting the name change made by my parents. Aunt Leona and Uncle Paul Markiewicz also changed their name during the 1940s to Markie. I asked Aunt Leona how her father reacted to these changes. By that time, she said, her father realized that his children were Americans, not Poles, as he thought of himself, but he was confident that our Polish heritage would be remembered and respected. My uncle Henry J. Zygmunt epitomized this remembrance and respect in his lifelong dedication to numerous Polish civic and cultural organizations. 

Now when I open my mother’s old album and see the "Miss Allegheny" newspaper clipping, I smile as I remember Stephanie telling me the story of Matylda Zygmunt as a young woman: "Your mother walked with a bounce in her step. She loved to dance, and I remember her saying that they were not going to have children; they would travel and always exercise to keep physically fit. Then they got married and all of a sudden Matylda was desperate to have a baby. But Joey didn’t come along until 1937 and then the three girls came." As we looked at a family photograph from 1947, Stephanie remarked, "How proud and happy Matylda looks in this photo. She loved being the mother of her children."

Dorothy Lance Gray's early years were spent in Braddock. She now lives in Murrysville. Since her retirement from the pharmacy business, she and her husband have pursued an avid interest in family history research. Her current project is the story of the Kryzosiak, Zygmunt, and Ulanowicz families. Several of her family history articles have appeared in the newsletter of the Braddock's Field Historical Society.
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1 Interview with Stephanie Tracz, Braddock, Pa., September 21, 2003.
4 PBS American Experience “Miss America,” 2005.
5 The Pittsburgh Press, (July 14, 1929) 7.
6 Pittsburczanin (August 7, 1929).
8 Lamb, George H., ed., The Unwritten History of Braddock's Field (Braddock, 1917) 272.
9 Interview with Stephanie Tracz, Braddock, Pa., November 9, 2003.
10 Ibid.
11 Pittsburczanin (August 9, 1929).
12 Ibid., October 12, 1929
13 Ibid., November 15, 1929.
14 Ibid., December 9, 1929.
15 Ibid., February 15, 1930.
16 Interview with Tracz, November 9, 2003.
17 Pittsburczanin (March 7, 1930).
18 Interview with Tracz, November 9, 2003.
19 Pittsburczanin (June 19, 1930).
20 Ibid., June 24, 1930.
21 Interview with Tracz, November 9, 2003.
22 Ibid.
23 Pittsburczanin (June 18, 1948).
25 Interview with Tracz, November 9, 2003.
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