

# Book honors heritage of Poles in Rochester

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Whenever Kathleen Urbanic felt she didn't want to spend another day gathering research for her recently published history of Rochester's Polish-American community, the book's designer, Frank Anders, would admonish her to continue.

"Look. No one is going to do this again for a hundred years," Anders would tell her. "So just do it!"

One hundred years from now, Urbanic's labor of love, *Shoulder to Shoulder — Polish Americans in Rochester, N.Y., 1890-1990*, may well be noted in anthologies of Polish-American history.

Urbanic said work on the book occupied most of her weekends for the last nine years. Its 217 pages primarily detail the establishment, growth and eventual dissolution of the Polish community on the north side of Rochester.

Published by the Polonia Civic Center, Inc., the book was funded by Monroe County, the New York State Council on the Arts, and a number of Polish organizations and private citizens. Urbanic added that Father Robert F. McNamara, diocesan archivist and professor emeritus of church history at St. Bernard's Seminary, was one of the most helpful members of the local community as she conducted her research.

*Shoulder to Shoulder* carries the reader on a colorful, century-long journey by an immigrant group that arrived in Rochester with little but faith, imagination and memories of their oppressed homeland, but which eventually became one of the city's most vibrant, close-knit and creative communities.

Urbanic christened the book *Shoulder to Shoulder* after reading a speech given by Bishop Bernard McQuaid at the dedication of St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish in 1890. Telling the assembled immigrants that they were "beloved children in Christ, strangers you are, and yet not strangers before Christ," the bishop added these words about their new church:

"True, it is only a small beginning of the work that is to be done. The Cathedral seventy years ago was not as fine as the church today. It was established by a few poor Irish people, but see where it is today. If you stand shoulder to shoulder you can be in the same position in the future."

St. Stanislaus Parish would come to be the center of life for many residents of the Polish community on the city's north side — baptizing their infants, educating their children, celebrating the weddings of their sons and daughters, and providing a social hub for Polish people of all ages.

Yet, as Urbanic's history notes, that community experienced violent division



Bruce Litoff

The cover photo for Kathleen Urbanic's book *Shoulder to Shoulder* displays memorabilia from Rochester's Polish community. Urbanic is a parishioner at St. Stanislaus Kostka Parish.

and strife in the first decade of this century when a large minority of Polish parishioners broke away from St. Stanislaus to form their own parish, St. Casimir's.

The new parish joined other Polish communities throughout the country in forming the Polish National Catholic Church, which broke from Rome in 1897. The schism was provoked by disputes between Polish immigrants and their local bishops over such questions as parish administration and lifestyle.

"If outsiders scarcely knew the difference between a Roman Catholic Pole and a National Catholic Pole, in Polish neighborhoods the distinction was sharply drawn and the memory spanned generations," Urbanic wrote in her chapter on the battle

between St. Stanislaus' pastor in the early 1900s and his lay opponents.

Urbanic's history is replete with similar tales of dramatic change, offset by lighter moments in the community's history. Just a sampling of the book's anecdotes is enough to pique interest in *Shoulder to Shoulder* for Polish-Americans and others alike.

• St. Stanislaus' pastor in 1901, Father Teofil Szadzinski, once visited with Polish-American Leon Czolgosz, the convicted assassin of President William McKinley, while Czolgosz was incarcerated at Auburn Prison awaiting execution.

The priest refused to disclose his conversation with Czolgosz to the press, noting, Urbanic wrote, "that the press would do

more harm than good if it continued to advertize Czolgosz' deed. Others, he feared, might mistake the man's notoriety for fame and attempt to follow his example."

• Edmund Lorentz, a translator proficient in nine European languages, saved the City of Rochester unknown amounts in court fees during the 1920s and 1930s by serving as the representative of the foreign-born in city court.

"His co-workers once estimated that four of five disputes involving immigrants never reached city court because of Lorentz's ability to coax opposing parties into a settlement," Urbanski recounted.

• Representing the American Federation of Teachers, Polish immigrant Adam Urbanski, current president of the Rochester Teachers Association, traveled to Poland in 1988 to participate in the International Human Rights Conference in Nowa Huta.

"Granted visas on the pretext that they were traveling as tourists, the AFT group arrived at the Warsaw airport where Urbanski was singled out for interrogation and search by military officials, successfully concealing in his wallet a slip of paper with the names of Solidarity contacts," the author related.

Indeed, Urbanic remarked that the 1980s rise of the labor movement Solidarity and the election of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla to the papacy as John Paul II — the first non-Italian pope in 455 years — gave Rochester's Polish-Americans a new sense of pride and self-respect.

It was not ever thus, however. For years, Polish-Americans had been the butt of ethnic jokes and the pitiable object of lament for those mourning Soviet oppression in Eastern Europe.

Having grown up in Rochester's north side — "Polish Town" — in the 1950s and '60s, Urbanic recalled that some of her peers at times tried to shed their heritage to assimilate with and gain the respect of other kids.

"You could see when we went to high school, and we got out of the ethnic environment. I could see that some of them didn't want to admit to (being Polish), or they de-emphasized it," she said.

Now, however, as new immigrants from Poland have reinvigorated Rochester's Polish community, and the world has watched a Polish pope encourage a Polish revolution, Urbanic said Poles in Rochester are coming together more often to celebrate their heritage — even though many have moved from the city's north side.

"That sense of community is not dependent on the neighborhood," she said.

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**EDITORS' NOTE** — Copies of *Shoulder to Shoulder* may be ordered for \$17 each by calling Eugene Golomb, president of the Polonia Civic Centre, at 716/323-2106.



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