

Gwen S. Polomark and Her Family

Mundare pioneers

by Marie Lesoway



The following story is a modified excerpt of the original prepared for the *Service in the Vineyard of the Lord* exhibit at the Basilian Fathers Museum in Mundare, Alberta, in 2002.

The story is based on Marie Lesoway's audio-recorded interviews with Miss Polomark on September 19, October 3, November 22 and November 25, 2001.

Supplementary research of archival and secondary sources was conducted to add social and historical context to Miss Polomark's reminiscences.

The cited translations of Ukrainian sources were prepared by Marie Lesoway.

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Gwen S. Polomark (1914–2007) was a Mundare pioneer and a beloved music and English teacher at Mundare School. Her expertise as an educator and a specialist in her field was recognized province-wide. For many years, Gwen marked departmental English exams for the Alberta Department of Education. That a first-generation Canadian could achieve such mastery of English language and literature—and such recognition of her skills—is a remarkable accomplishment. Even more remarkable for her time, Gwen was a trained pianist and an Associate of the Toronto Conservatory of Music.

Miss Polomark was the author's high school English teacher.



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First Families, First Citizens

When Gwen Polomark was born, on October 14, 1914, Mundare had had rail service for less than a decade and the grand old Sts. Peter and Paul Church was just four years old. The town was growing rapidly. There was a thriving business community. Immigrant families were beginning to make good and finding acceptance in Canadian society. And Mundare's cultural institutions were strong and vibrant.

Gwen Polomark and her family were community builders and community leaders. The Polomark name can be found in the annals of many of Mundare's institutions, including the Mundare Hospital, the National Hall, the Mundare Choir, the Children of Mary, the Royal Purple, the Hospital Auxiliary committee and the Ukrainian Catholic Women's League.

In the 1930s, Polomark voices were heard defending the Ukrainian community's right to preserve its cultural and religious heritage. And in the 1940s, the Polomark sons defended their freedom and their country during World War II.

Gwen Polomark's story and her family's history are peopled with strong, entrepreneurial men and women. These were Mundare's pioneers, and their service to their community has left a legacy that many generations will cherish.

Joe Polomark joined the Canadian navy and served on a mine sweeper.

John Polomark joined the Royal Canadian Air Force as a pilot officer. He was killed in pursuit of enemy bombers headed for London when his plane crashed in Wales on April 25, 1944.

Carpe Diem

“Seize the day” is an apt motto for both sides of Gwen Polomark’s family.

Gwen’s father, Sam, and her uncle, Dan Polomark, were among Mundare’s first businessmen. Dan came first. In 1898, he left Zavydche, Radekhiv, in western Ukraine with a group of thirteen families that included the Feduns, the Bashistys and the Kucheras—all of whom settled in the Wostok–Krakow area. In 1902, having worked as a musician, a railroad man and an apprentice tailor, Dan settled on a homestead north of Hilliard. Instead of farming, he built a store and stocked it with supplies hauled from Edmonton by wagon.

When the railroad line came through in 1905, Dan Polomark moved his family to Mundare and built a two-storey, tin-clad store just west of Main Street. Business was good and Dan was soon able to build a new, larger store—complete with upstairs living quarters—right on Main Street. He brought his younger brother, Sam, to Canada and the two Polomarks went into partnership. Within a few years, the Polomark Brothers store was a thriving business known for quality goods and good service. Sam was well-established, and the time had come for him to seek a wife.

Sam Polomark married Eva Kobarynka in 1909.

Eva was born in Lazy in the Yaroslav region of western Ukraine. She came to Canada as a teenager—accompanied by a married older sister and her family, an older half brother and a cousin.

Eva’s age when she immigrated and the date of her arrival are not known, but she was probably working in Edmonton when the first Sisters Servants of Mary Immaculate arrived in the fall of 1902. At this time, approximately 300 Ukrainian girls were employed as domestic servants in Edmonton homes. They congregated at St. Joachim’s parish, where the Oblate Father Alphonse Jan tended to their spiritual needs. In

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February, 1901, Father Jan “organized a night school where three evenings a week these girls attended classes in English, religion and handicrafts.”*

Eva Polomark was one of the girls who learned English at these night classes. It was there, at the Ruthenian Young Ladies’ Club, that she and the Ukrainian sisters forged the close friendships that Eva cherished all her life. The memoirs of Sister Ambrose Lenkewech, writing about the sisters’ arrival at St. Joachim’s, show the depth of those bonds:

...A great surprise awaited us. We thought Sister was taking us to the chapel, but when she opened the door to one of the rooms, it was filled with our [Ruthenian] girls, who welcomed us so sincerely that we cried out with happiness. We joyfully made one another’s acquaintance. These girls often came to us, and later a few of them joined our congregation.†

Like many immigrant girls, Eva found work in the home of one of Edmonton’s well-to-do families. Her employer, the prominent Alberta Supreme Court Judge Nicholas Dominic Beck, was kind to his hired help. Eva was the assistant to Judge Beck’s cook and soon became an excellent cook herself.

Photographs of the young Eva show her to be a stylish, attractive woman. She was also a pragmatist who was brave enough to seize the opportunities life offered. And she was a woman who embraced adventure. It may have been her adventurous spirit that tied her fate to Sam Polomark’s. We’ll never know for sure. But Sam and Eva’s life together certainly had unconventional beginnings.

* Sister Claudia Helen Popowich, SSMI, *To Serve Is to Love: The Canadian Story of the Sister Servants of Mary Immaculate* (Toronto: Sister Servants of Mary Immaculate, 1971), 32. Popowich notes (p. 31) that, in 1902, Bishop Legal sent Father Jan to Ukraine “with orders to remain there to learn the language in the event that no Ukrainian religious would consent to come to Canada.”

† Sister Ambrose M. Lenkewech, SSMI, “Z nashykh pochatkiv u Kanadi,” in *Kalendar ukrains’koi rodyny na rik 1942* (Mundare: Basilian Press, 1942), 58. Translated from Ukrainian by Marie Lesoway.

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Eva married Sam virtually at their first meeting, at St. Josaphat's Church in Edmonton. Sam's intended bride had stood him up at the altar. Eva, who was the bridesmaid, was persuaded to stand in.

Eva knew she didn't have a lot of options. She could spend her salad days as hired help in someone else's house. She could become a homesteader's wife, whose lot in life was even more difficult than a domestic's. Or she could grab at the chance fate offered her, marry the dashing, distinguished Sam Polomark, and be the mistress of her own home. Eva chose Sam.

While Sam and Eva's marriage was not a love match, it was certainly a relationship based on respect. Eva soon became a partner in Sam's community-building efforts. Among the values she and Sam shared were a deep sense of service and commitment to their faith, their Ukrainian heritage and their community. These were values they passed on to their children.

The Polomark Clan

Eva and Sam Polomark had five children: Vera (who died as a child), Eugenia Stephania (better known as Gwen S.), John Marshall, Joseph William and Susie Anna.

Gwen (BEd), John (BCom) and Joe (BSc, MBA) were all university graduates—an impressive accomplishment for first-generation Canadians. Susie was born with Down syndrome at a time when community support services and special education were not available. She needed special care throughout her life. When their mother died in 1940, this task fell to big sister Gwen.

It wasn't always easy. Gwen was teaching full time, running the household and involved in a host of community activities. Even lunch hours weren't a break. She had to get home, prepare a meal and then relieve her father at the store so that he could go home for lunch. Somehow Gwen managed, although not without sacrificing some of her own dreams for her family's sake.

Gwen was a world traveller, an affirmed book lover and a professional woman who was making her own way long before women with careers were a common thing. She was a teacher for 44 years, and for many years, she marked departmental English exams for

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the Alberta Department of Education. She was also a trained pianist who shared her musical gifts freely in all senses of the word—playing wherever she was needed, without pay.

Gwen devoted her life to service—to her family and extended family, to her students and to her community. She cared for her widowed father and her beloved Susie, and in later years, looked after her brother Joe when he needed long-term care. She helped hundreds of students develop the skills and character they needed to succeed in school and become good citizens. And she worked untiringly for her church and for countless community organizations and causes.

“Well, that’s life...You had to do the best you could.”

—Gwen S. Polomark, September 19, 2001

“The most rewarding thing [I’ve done] was to work with children and with people who needed me.”

—Gwen S. Polomark, October 3, 2001

Building Prosperity

Sam and Dan Polomark were among Mundare’s leading citizens. They were better educated than many pioneers. And they were successful businessmen at a time when most Ukrainian Canadians were farmers.

By 1916, both brothers had built fine two-storey homes. Sam and Eva Polomark’s home was elegant and up-to-date with the finest china, linens, needlework and furnishings. Eva’s hospitality was legendary, and her home was often a stopping place for visiting dignitaries.

In the 1920s, Sam and Dan Polomark bought pianos and made sure their daughters had lessons. Sam Polomark’s piano was a resource freely shared with the community.

Dan and Sam Polomark were among the first citizens of Mundare to own cars. When Metropolitan Andrei Sheptytskyi visited Mundare for the second time, in

Gwen Polomark started piano lessons when she was about 8. Her first teacher was Mary (nee Stanton) Kelly, the wife of long-time Mundare teacher and principal C. D. Kelly. Mr. Kelly boarded with the Polomark family before his marriage in 1922.

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1921, Dan Polomark was one of the parishioners who escorted him from the farm monastery to church in a car decorated for the occasion.

Dan was the more entrepreneurial of the two brothers and was always ready to try his hand at something new. In the early 1920s, Dan brought the movies to Mundare. He ran shows weekly and purchased a player piano to create the appropriate moods and sound effects.

The Polomark family name was originally "Polomarchuk" (Palamarczuk). In Canada, the name got shortened by circumstance rather than by design. The Polomark brothers frequently received shipments of goods by rail—often from Eastern Canadian suppliers. Their name was so long that it was difficult to write all of it on a packing crate. Station agents often ran out of space before they got to the "-chuk," and in time, the brothers decided to drop the ending altogether.

In 1929, Dan sold his share of the Polomark Brothers store to Sam and bought a hotel at Daysland. It was a fortuitous move for him, but one that nearly destroyed his brother.

The Polomarks' business had boomed throughout the 1920s. Their original base of customers had been from the Krakow area, where many of their fellow villagers had settled. Over time, the brothers developed a reputation for top-notch goods, and theirs was the store of choice for a growing clientele. The economy was strong and people were able to plan big weddings and buy luxury items. Customers charged considerable

amounts on credit, with the expectation that they could pay things off once the harvest was brought in.

With the stock market crash of 1929, everything changed. Sam, on his own then, was left saddled with huge debts that his customers simply could not pay.

Boom. The crisis hit. No one could pay their bills. Big bills....

It was a struggle. But he continued. Good service, good goods. None but the best.... And these other stores all closed up...but Dad hung on. He was a scholar from home. He kept good books and he did it the way it should be done. He didn't drive himself into debt or anything. And the people who understood quality—...[if] they wanted shoes, they came to Sam Polomark's. And if...you need a

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special dress shirt for the first time in your life—you go to Sam Polomark's.

—Gwen S. Polomark, September 19, 2001

With determination, good management and a continuing commitment to quality and service, Sam Polomark managed to survive the Great Depression. He stayed in business right up to the end of his life, and went to the store every day until a few months before his death in 1977—two weeks shy of his 95th birthday.

Building Community

The National Hall

The National Hall was founded...from the deep-seated need of people who, besides land, freedom and the necessities of life, craved bread for their souls and wanted to preserve, in their new country, the spirit of the community and cultural life they had brought from their homeland.*

Sam Polomark was deeply committed to the growth and development of Ukrainian cultural life. In 1911, he was one of the first organizers of the National Hall, together with Michael Korchinsky, Gregory Sawchuk, the Savich brothers, Ivan Baran, Kyrylo Bayduza and others. Before the first hall was built, in 1917, Sam Polomark made his store available for community meetings.

Mundare's National Hall was founded as reading room (*chytal'nia Prosvity*), and its book collection was eventually worth \$500. It is presumed that this library was lost when the first hall burned down on March 30, 1925. Sam Polomark served on the building committee for the second hall and put in several terms as the secretary and vice president.

The commemorative booklet published in 1964, when Mundare's third and current National Hall was opened and blessed, refers to Sam Polomark as a man who, from the

* Father Epiphany Paschak, OSBM, "Ukrains'kyi narodnii dim," in *A Solemn Blessing and Opening of the Ukrainian National Home at Mundare, Alberta*, 16. Translated from Ukrainian by Marie Lesoway.

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very beginning, “devotedly and with all his heart worked for the good of the National Hall” and for all the clubs and organizations it housed.* These included the drama club, Boian, which was founded in the hall’s earliest years, and a debating club founded in 1926.

Sam Polomark was highly regarded by his fellow townspeople. A mark of this regard is that he was often chosen to welcome visiting dignitaries in the traditional Ukrainian fashion, with bread and salt.

Sam extended this traditional welcome to Hetman Danylo Skoropadsky when he visited Mundare on December 20, 1937. In 1951, Sam welcomed Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent with bread and salt when he visited Mundare on the 60th anniversary of Ukrainian pioneer settlement in Canada.

Concerts and Performances

The Mundare National Hall hosted numerous conferences, meetings, political conventions and concerts—including performances by noted Ukrainian artists of the day. The choreographer Vasyl Avramenko, the Ukrainian Bandurist Chorus and a number of opera singers visited Mundare. The singers included operatic soprano Maria Sokil, who toured Canada and the United States in 1937–1938; mezzo-soprano Olga Lepkova, who was best known for her role as Oksana in Lysenko’s *Zaporizhian Cossack beyond the Danube*; operatic tenor Mykhailo Holynsky; and others.

If a visiting artist needed a piano, the Polomark piano would be hauled across Main Street for the occasion, and hauled back home once the performance was done. And if the performer hadn’t brought an accompanist, young Gwen Polomark was recruited to fill in.

Our piano was used in the National Hall.... They would get celebrities coming, from the old country—opera singers, you know. But they wouldn’t sing without a piano. So out goes our piano. Sometimes they had a pianist with them;

* Paschak, *A Solemn Blessing and Opening of the Ukrainian National Home*, 31. Translated from Ukrainian by Marie Lesoway.

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other times I had to struggle along and accompany them, you know.... So that was...entertainment. What else? There was no TV or anything. Until my uncle brought movies to Mundare....

—Gwen S. Polomark, September 19, 2001

The Mundare Choir

Sam Polomark was one of the founding members of the Mundare Choir, which was established under the direction of Kyrylo Bayduza around 1911.

Sam loved music, and both he and his brother played the violin. Sam also loved to sing. When the old-country-trained choirmaster Kyrylo Bayduza came to Mundare in 1911, Sam encouraged him to stay and start a choir. He even helped out by giving Bayduza a job at the Polomark Brothers store.

Kyrylo Bayduza had been the director of a choir in Bile, a village in the Chortkiv region of Ukraine. He studied cantoring and choir directing in his village, and later, in Stanislaviv, where he completed a course and passed an examination.

Sam Polomark sang bass in Bayduza's choir. When his daughter Gwen was in Grade 9 (circa 1929), she joined the alto section. By this time, choir practices were held in the National Hall, around the potbelly stove. The choir rehearsed at least once a week, and more often before performances. "People came from far and wide to hear a concert," Gwen recalled. "They were...starved for a little bit of music."

Under Bayduza's direction, the Mundare Choir developed a broad sacred and secular repertoire and received national recognition. Two events of note are recorded in Father Epiphany Paschak's history of the choir.

The first took place in Edmonton in 1927.

The Canadian Red Cross was preparing a radio program and invited various ethnic groups to participate. The Mundare Choir performed. The event took place at the Strand Theatre (Pantages). The audience response to the choir's performance was overwhelming, and the people

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outside the hall wanted to get into the theatre at any cost. They broke the windows. The response of the radio audience was also enthusiastic. The choir received tens of congratulatory letters and telegrams.*

The choir's second huge success took place in Calgary in 1930 at a "Festival of Nations" concert sponsored by the Canadian Pacific Railroad. Gwen Polomark was a member of this award-winning choir. "It was quite the thing," she recalled. "They really honoured us."

Here is Father Paschak's account:

Mykhailo Korchinsky made arrangements for the Mundare choir to be invited. Rehearsals were held three times a week, so that the choir could properly represent the Ukrainian community. The CPR made a train car available to transport the choir to Calgary. A Ukrainian dance troupe under the direction of Osyp Pryima of Edmonton performed with the choir. Many nations performed at the festival. Sweden's leading singer took part. The choir members stayed at the finest hotel, the Palliser, where the festival was held. When the time came for the Ukrainian choir to perform, the audience burst into thunderous applause at the sight of the beautiful costumes of the choir members. The choir sang "O Canada" and a few Ukrainian songs, plus "Volga Boatmen." When the singing ended, the audience did not want the choir to go, and demanded additional songs. The head of the festival invited the choir to stay a few additional days and showed a telegram from Toronto that said the CPR administration would cover all the costs of their stay and would even send the choir to a festival in Vancouver. The singers stayed from Friday to Sunday, performing once more at the hotel, and on Sunday, at Calgary's Ukrainian National Hall. In the evening, a special train took them back to

* Paschak, *A Solemn Blessing and Opening of the Ukrainian National Home*, 20. Translated from Ukrainian by Marie Lesoway.

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Mundare. The Calgary papers carried glowing reports about the Mundare Choir's performance. The choir took first place at the festival, and the director was awarded \$100.*

Service, Character and Accomplishment

The story of the Polomark family is closely woven into the rich tapestry of Mundare's story. Many of Mundare's citizens—past and present—spent their school days in Miss Gwen S. Polomark's classroom. Her contributions and those of her family served their community well. They left a memorable mark on Mundare.

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Gwen Polomark was the editor of the local history book, *Memories of Mundare.*

* Paschak, *A Solemn Blessing and Opening of the Ukrainian National Home*, 20. Translated from Ukrainian by Marie Lesoway.