



### **History of St.Hedwig Parish- Southbridge. MA**

Golden Jubilee St. Hedwig's Parish, Southbridge, MA,  
p. 21-27. CAP at Orchard Lake.

To review the history of St. Hedwig's Parish in Southbridge, one has the rather rare experience of reliving fifty years of determination, devotion, faith and loyalty to the Church, expressed as it was in the language and song of the great Polish saints.

St. Hedwig's Parish had its beginnings in a little mission which was established for the Poles of the Southbridge community by the Pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Webster, Rev. A. A. Cyran. Organized on September 11, 1916, this unnamed mission continued to gather strength in numbers and momentum until it was as declared a parish under the patronage of St. Hedwig by Bishop Beaven, of Springfield, MA on Jan. 1, 1918. Rev. Martin Hanyz became the first resident Pastor. He had proposed three patron saints for the new parish: St. Casimir, St. John Kanty and St. Hedwig. The Bishop selected Jadwiga as the Patron of the Southbridge Poles. Masses were celebrated in the Old Notre Dame Church on Pine St. This same year, 1918, Fr. Hanyz sought and purchased a plot of land bordering on Everett and Summer Streets from Mrs. Sara Delahanty for the sum of \$15,000. The property was part of the Dressel Estate and included a spacious brick home with all furnishings and a distinctive carriage house. The vacant lot adjacent to the rectory and bordering on the corner of Everett and Summer was the site selected for the new church. On Labor Day, September 6, 1920, St. Hedwig's Church was dedicated. Bishop Beaven blessed the completed wooden structure and celebrated the first Mass in the church. Rev. Andrew Krzywda from Three Rivers, MA spoke at the dedication. The church was built at a cost of \$30,000 and made to accommodate approximately 450. St. Hedwig's Choir under the direction of Peter Kowalewski sang and there was a Polish band to add to the festivities. It was a proud day for the Parish; Founder, Rev. Hanyz. He and his parishioners conducted picnics and carnivals, some at Hamilton Woolen grove. Older parishioners recall today how they traveled to the more developed Polish areas like Worcester and Webster to solicit offerings of ten and twenty five cents to help build their church.

Parish records indicate that the first Baptism by a Polish priest in the Southbridge community was administered on September 24, 1916 by Father A. Cyran. The infant was Thaddeus Slupek. The first baptism in St. Hedwig's Parish, administered by the first Pastor, Rev. Martin Hanyz, was that of Maryanna Lazarz on January 20, 1918. The first recorded marriage was that of Peter Lesniewski and Agnes Osowski, performed by Fr. Cyran on October 2, 1916. Fr. Hanyz performed

the first marriage ceremony in the new parish on January 28, 1918. The young couple was John Milczewski and Catherine Ochala.

Fr. Martin Hanyz was the assistant pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Webster when he was named the first Pastor of the Southbridge parish on January 1, 1918 by Bishop Beaven. He was born in Buffalo, New York on November 5, 1881, the son of Francis Hanyz and Petronella Prusek. He was baptized in St. Stanislaus Church in Buffalo on November 6, 1881. He was ordained on February 10, 1911 at Fort Wayne, Indiana by Bishop Herman J. Alerding. His education was begun at Notre Dame University in Indiana and continued at the Catholic University of Washington, D.C. In June 1967, Notre Dame University made him a member of the University's Fifty Year Club and honored him among their more distinguished alumni by presenting him with a gold plaque of recognition. From 1911 to 1914, Fr. Hanyz served in parishes in Indiana and Illinois. With the advice and encouragement of his good friend from South Chicago, Bishop Rhodes, he decided to apply for incardination to the Springfield, MA Diocese and was appointed to Webster in 1914. In 1918 came his first and only pastorate appointment to Southbridge. On April 23, 1961 he was honored at a testimonial dinner and program at Pilsudski Hall by the Southbridge Polonia on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of his ordination. July 1, 1966 he asked Bishop Flanagan to relieve him from active duty in the parish. His assistant, Rev. Henry S. Banach became the parish administrator while Fr. Hanyz continued in the role of Pastor. On May 1, 1968 Bishop Flanagan accepted Fr. Hanyz's request to be finally retired from his pastorate and declared Pastor Emeritus with residence; in St. Hedwig's Rectory. From his early years, the first Pastor of St. Hedwig's had won for himself an enviable reputation as a preacher and orator of high esteem. Witty, articulate and informed, his sermons were often colored with patriotic theme. He predicted the betrayal of Poland by the Allies. History found him a true prophet. His sermons in the style of Fr. Coughlin of Detroit, the famous radio priest of the Roosevelt era, stirred comment and reaction beyond the boundaries of Southbridge. He never had to recall or make public apology for his talks. He was a devotee of Polish culture, and a master of the English language. His vocabulary was a cause of wonder, as he injected into his sermons a strong appreciation of the cultural arts, music and science. He was a fiery leader, but he kept his people bonded together in the love of their faith, and the expression of that faith in the language and customs of their Polish ancestors. His days in retirement are gladdened by his unceasing love for reading as he privately continues five hours each day to broaden the horizon of his knowledge with readings in Polish, English and German on themes ranging from architecture to zoology. He continues to be an expert in his knowledge of sports. His fantastic memory for sport scores and player averages have entertained many of the present generation. Today, not only the Dean of the Diocesan Polish Clergy, he is the oldest clergyman in the Southbridge area, and known for his friendly social manner, he is a familiar name to all faiths and all peoples of Southbridge. Truly, if anyone, he alone, merits the title of "Mr. Southbridge." His name is legend.

One of Fr. Hanyz's final parish projects was to purchase land on Woodstock Road, adjacent to Notre Dame Cemetery for a parish cemetery. On August 16, 1962 he purchased a parcel of land from Sigrid Page for the sum of \$12,000. The land was cleared but the cemetery had a slow beginning because the road was not constructed nor the lots surveyed and divided for purchase.

A Parish Cemetery Committee was organized and with the leadership of Fr. Henry Banach, who was then the assistant, Walter Polomski, Stanley Dudek, Walter Sawicki and Eva Rewinski set themselves about the task of organizing the cemetery. Immediately the town surveyor, Benjamin F. Tully, surveyed and divided the grave plots. A new road was paved throughout the cemetery and St. Hedwig's Parish Cemetery began to prosper. Lucian S. Kaszynski is the first recorded burial on November 27, 1964.

The second Pastor of St. Hedwig's is Rev. Henry S. Banach who came to the parish on January 3, 1963 as an assistant. Father Banach was educated in Worcester at Holy Cross College and at the University of Montreal and the Grand Seminary. He was awarded a doctorate in Theology by the University on September 18, 1949. Father Banach holds the distinction of being the first priest in America to be awarded a Fulbright Government Scholarship to study theology abroad. In 1953 he went first to the University of Perugia in northern Italy and then later to the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome where he completed his degree work in Canon Law while in residence at the North American College Graduate House of Studies. Upon his return to the Diocese he had been assigned to parish work at St. Joseph's in Gardner, where he was administrator, and then returning to St. Joseph's in Webster where he had previously served soon after his ordination. He has held various teaching posts in the diocese among them professor of theology and philosophy at Regina Coeli College in Fitchburg; and then serving as Department Head of Philosophy and Theology at Anna Maria College in Paxton prior to his appointment as administrator of St. Hedwig's Parish. He continues to serve on the Diocesan Executive Board of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine and has helped author the first text books for the teacher training classes of that same confraternity. He became administrator of the parish in July 1966 and immediately announced plans for updating the material plant. Begun in September 1967 the renewal of the parish properties is now complete. It includes the newly renovated rectory and the liturgical change of the sanctuary according to the directives of Vatican II Council. The new addition to the front section of the church enhances the restored edifice, now completely repaired and painted both in its exterior and interior. A Parish Council had been formed two years ago and this group of parishioners continue to assist the Pastor in the administration of the parish. The Council in this Jubilee year includes Dr. Henry A. Grzyb, Robert Graf, Nora Adams, Rita Dudek, Theresa Howard, Edwin and Jennie Swiatek, Helene Seremet, Frances Polakowski and Atty. Walter Snyder.

The history of St. Hedwig's is intimately identified with the zealous priests who have served as assistants down through the years. Of these, Father Alexander Struczko and Father Henry Kreczko, are now deceased. The others include Father Joseph Niedzwiecki, Father John Kochanowski, Father Walter Siemaszko, and Father John Szamocki. Father Henry Banach, the last of these assistants in tenure, is presently the Pastor of the parish.

Throughout her fifty year history, St. Hedwig's has never been remiss in her duty to country and community. 15 of her young men have sacrificed their lives in World War II. More than 159 from her membership served in various branches of the Armed Forces. In the recent years of the Vietnam crisis, the names of two younger parishioners were added to the list of those

dying in the line of duty: Joseph Adamick Jr. and Jan Krawczyk. In Southbridge at present, the quality of community leadership runs high among St. Hedwig's parishioners: doctors, dentists, lawyers, accountants, teachers, nurses, social service workers, skilled technicians and qualified office workers: their number is legion, stretching their competence far beyond the community and parish from which they came. And in the parish youth St. Hedwig's enjoys particular pride: 63 of these are enrolled in colleges or pursuing post-college courses. Scholastic honors and scholarships for her youthful members continue to augment parish pride. The much coveted American Optical Scholarship Award had recently been awarded to two parishioners: Elizabeth Mroczkowski and Barbara Howard. Nancy Swiacki, herself a scholarship grantee, had been added to the 1967-68 roster of Who's Who In American Colleges. From the parish family, two have gone on into the priesthood, Rev. Mitchell Koprowski, Pastor of St. Mary's Church in Mullen, Nebraska, and Rev. Casimir Swiacki, Pastor of St. Andrew Bobola Church in Dudley, MA.

In the present Jubilee Year St. Hedwig's adult membership is almost 600. There are approximately 190 children, including the pre-school group and the high school level. Beginning their 51st year as a parish in Southbridge, the people of St. Hedwig's look to the future: strengthened by the grace of God, confirmed in their faith, attached to the cultural traditions of their Polish ancestors:" Please God, another generation, as yet unborn, shall write additional chapters to this parish history. May they be as glorious and dedicated, as those already written into the history of the Diocese's southernmost Polish speaking parish: St. Hedwig's in Southbridge.