

High-energy routines turbo-charge the polka

Bulls Head entertainers put spirited fun into the dance routines they perform for audiences

By JULIA MARTIN
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

"Turbo-charged!" is being used to describe the high-energy polka dancing of Elaine and Matthew Bonowitz of Bulls Head.

They incorporate swing, country, ballroom, the oberek (a lively Polish style that means to hop and turn), and other contemporary steps into their dance routines.

Mrs. Bonowitz says, "It's not a simple grandfather's dance."

Their style is more creative, she says. "We're trying to put more pizzazz into polka, and more young people are receptive to that style and are showing more of an interest."

"With our dancing," said Bonowitz, "we're hoping to broaden the opinion of polka, and show people what polka really is. If you can count 1-2-3, you can polka."

The Bonowitzes have danced their way across the country and on cruise ships, promoting, teaching and performing the polka for participants from age 8 to 80.

Their energy level evoked the "turbo-

charged" description from Suzanne Saramak when they appeared for the Long-Island-based Polish Gift of Life Foundation.

Not every fan of the dance is Polish-American. In May the Bonowitzes gave a demonstration at the Feast Day celebration of St. Adalbert's R.C. Church in Elm Park.

At the first notes of the melodious accordion music, a big smile of recognition broke out on the face of Anthony Laurenzano of Smithville, N.J.

"That's it!" he said with enthusiasm, not able to resist the urge to dance, and he invited a relative to join him for a spin

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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE/JIN LEE

Elaine Bonowitz and her husband Matthew perform the polka at St. Adalbert's R.C. Church in Elm Park.

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around the dance floor.

"The polka is the happiest music," said the former resident of a Polish neighborhood in Brooklyn. "It has an exciting beat, and I'm always delighted to hear it."

Elaine Bonowitz, a Bulls Head resident, and Matthew Bonowitz, who lived in Queens, had grown up dancing the polka, and as third-generation Polish, had moved in the same circles for years. But they didn't meet until six years ago at a dance in the Bayway Club over in Elizabeth, N.J., and the chemistry was immediate.

After their marriage four years ago at the club, they took a polka cruise for their honeymoon.

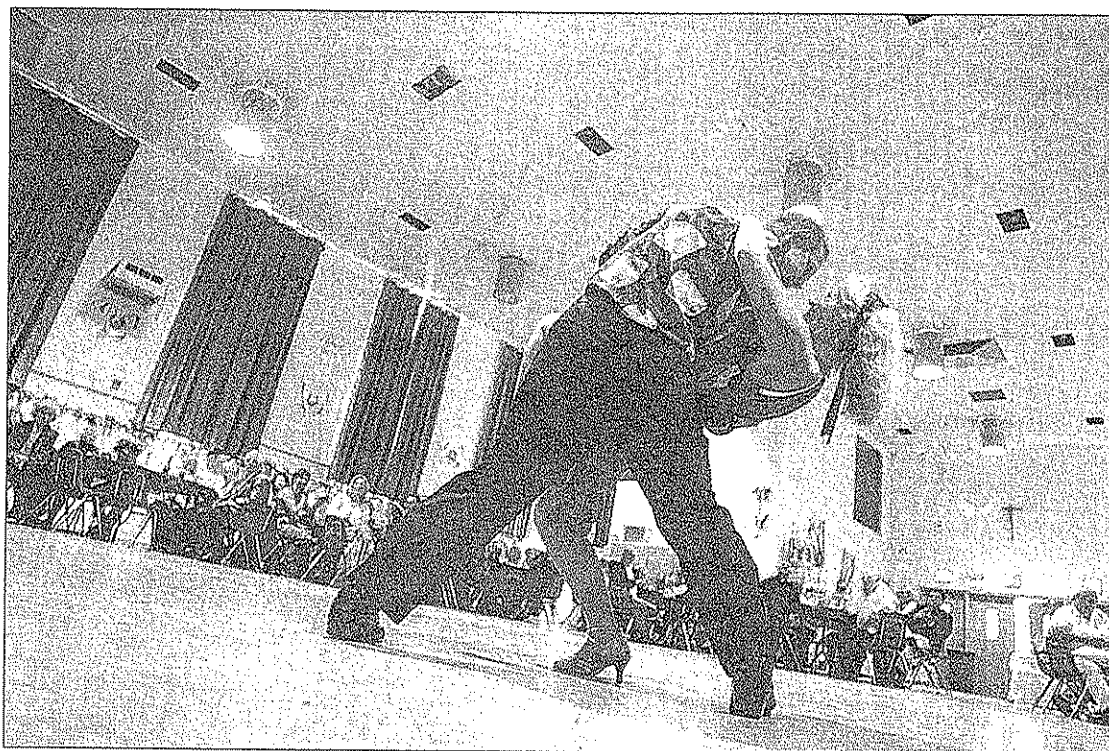
The next generation, Christopher Doran, 18, and Nicholas Doran, 15, Mrs. Bonowitz's sons by a former marriage, "took to the polka right away," she said, and when not dancing, often help with the sound system at the Bonowitzes' shows or serve as master of ceremony.

The Bonowitzes have danced in many places, including Las Vegas, Canada, the Bethlehem (Pa.) Summer Music Fest, the state fair in Sussex, N.J., the Wurstfest in Texas, and on television shows. Bonowitz also danced on the stage of the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn.

The couple currently gives an hour-long polka class at the Bayway Club, known as the "Polka Capital of the East," and the first one on May 27 was "a smashing success," said Mrs. Bonowitz. "Thirty people attended who had never danced the polka before."

The next classes will be July 8 from 8-9 p.m., and Aug. 13, 3-4 p.m., and are free with admission to the dance. (For more details, 908-355-3131.) The club is less than a mile from the base of the Goethals Bridge.

"It's a great way to socialize and meet new people," says



STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE PHOTOS/JIN LEE

Matthew and Elaine Bonowitz demonstrate some of the athleticism that they add to their polka routines.

Mrs. Bonowitz. In February, on a polka cruise of the eastern Caribbean, the Bonowitzes had more than 100 people attend their polka dance classes at sea. Many were single seniors who went alone and met new friends and dance partners.

"I'm sure," she added, "there are many young active seniors on Staten Island would love to be involved in polka music where there's an opportunity to socialize, meet new people, take trips, and have a great time."

The polka is not only enjoyable exercise. Being in good physical condition also is a plus for dancing.

For example, Mrs. Bonowitz, who works full-time as a legal secretary in Manhattan, exercises regularly at a gym. Although her husband gets plenty of physical activity as an employee of the DHL delivery service based in Elizabeth, he does work out in his basement because he has to maintain his strength for the lifts in the dance routine.

To gain more knowledge of professional performance quality dancing, the Bonowitzes attend weekly private classes at the Fred Astaire Dance Studio in Dongan Hills. Last month, to indulge their love of dance, they joined the Staten Island Ballroom Dancers, who meet weekly at New Dorp Moravian Church.

Anne Marie Verdi of Great Kills, the social chairperson, says the club is happy about its new members: "The polka is not actually a dance with which everyone is familiar, so we expect to be doing more polka."

In their extended families, polka music is always a part of celebrations, Bonowitz says.

Attending the St. Adalbert's celebration was a family group of parishioners, Susan Sinnicki Roesinger, Barbara Paras, and her mother and aunt, Rita Rzymkowski Paras and Jane Rzymkowski Hubbs, all of Elm Park, whose late parents were among the parish's founders, Vincent and Kazmiera Rzymkowski.

Ms. Paras said she enjoyed

the dance. "It's a warm, traditional salute to my heritage." A musician, she said she will often bring out her accordion at family gatherings, which is "the fullest instrument unto itself," and people do dance the polka. "It's like soul food for us."

The Bonowitzes are scheduled to serve as dance instructors and performers during a "Polka in Paradise Cruise" aboard the ship Opera sailing to the southern Caribbean from Fort Lauderdale Jan. 25 for 11 nights (12 days) or from San Juan Jan. 28 for eight nights (9 days).

The cruise is to feature 15-time Grammy Award Winner Jimmy Sturr and his orchestra, three other bands, and various additional featured entertainers.

The Bonowitzes can be contacted by email at newpolka@aol.com. Bayway Club: www.baywaypolishhome.org or phone 908-355-3131.

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