

A black and white photograph featuring the silhouette of the Statue of Neptune in the foreground on the left, holding a trident. To the right, the tall, dark silhouette of a church tower with multiple spires rises against a light, overcast sky. The overall composition is high-contrast and dramatic.

Sea Songs Along The Baltic

By John Townley, Historical Music Interpreter

Statue of Neptune in the main square in Old Gdansk.

After over a decade of tall ship races and general maritime revival among the great seafaring nations of the world, the last place you would expect to find a massive outbreak of sea fever would be a nation with almost no historical sea heritage and, indeed, very little coastline to engender one.

Yet that is exactly where The Press Gang and I found ourselves as our Lot Airlines flight settled down on the drab, rainy runway in Warsaw, Poland, last summer.

The landscape could have been Ohio or Illinois — flat, fertile plains surrounding grey slab high-rise buildings reminiscent of lower-income city housing in the States. What we saw, in fact, was downtown Warsaw, a rather depressing monument to Iron Curtain bureaucracy and strangled economics. A gruelling five-hour night train coach ride brought us to Gdynia and we settled into some primitive prefab quarters along with the twelve other British chantey singers in our company. Our middle-European adventure hardly seemed promising as we fell exhausted into our bunks.

Daylight provided another scene entirely, as did the week that followed. When we awoke, we found behind us a towering evergreen forest, and spread out below us the heavy industrial loading cranes of the port and the brilliant blue of the Baltic stretching out into infinity, with the low rise of the Hel Peninsula barely visible on the horizon. Our hosts, members of Poland's Liga Morska (Sea League) ushered us down to the water to the towering masts of two giant square-riggers, one a training ship, the other a museum, where we performed for smiling local news media equipped with home video cameras (they do the best they can — there is *no* money in Poland).

For the next week, we performed in jammed halls and on outdoor festival stages, sharing the limelight with literally dozens of Polish maritime music groups. The audiences sang along with one voice, cheered, and clapped rhythmically at the drop of a hat, their enthusiasm eclipsing that of American and other western audiences we had encountered. Despite the language, economic, and political barriers, they sang along — they knew *all* the songs, and in Polish, yet! And when British shantey singer/historian Stan Hugill (members may recall his appearance at The Mariners' Museum) stepped on stage, the crowds went wild, clapping madly and chanting, "Stashu, Stashu, Stashu" until the emcee had to quiet them to let the

concert continue. It was really amazing, considering the time and the place.

But it is real, indeed. Sea shanties have taken Poland by storm — they call it the "shantey movement," somewhat parallel to the swelling folk music boom in the U.S. during the 1960's. The audiences are primarily young — teens and college students — and enthusiastic like converts to a new religion. And, in a way, they are, as sea music means something very different to the Poles than just a revival of historical traditions. In fact, Poland has a rather limited maritime history, with only a short coastline on the Baltic, and only a sporadic history even as an independent nation. But the sea has a strong symbolic, largely recent, meaning to these young people — it represents the forces of nature that unite disparate and conflicting cultures and political views. As they repeatedly put it, "You can't see the politicians from the masthead." We are all shareholders in this planet, on land or on sea.

Their joy in singing knows no bounds, fired by a wonderful sense of togetherness and as genuine a desire for peace and friendship as I have ever seen. Despite the ever-present shadow of "Big Brother" Moscow ("you can choose your friends, but not your relatives," they quip), there is

a genuine optimism bred of youth, idealism, and camaraderie. In the face of the harsh realities of the crippled economy and swamp-like socialist bureaucracy, this is no small achievement.

And the songs? They're mostly American and British, translated into Polish: "Haul On The Bowline," "Blow The Man Down," "Leave Her, Johnnie, Leave Her." It really sounds strange in Polish. And yet, some of them aren't quite so familiar — you can recognize them, but there's something uniquely Polish there. The revival is only a few years old, and one feels that the folk process is moving so fast that these "foreign" songs will be entirely acculturated within a decade. In addition, they're turning out dozens of new songs of their own for the sea song writing and performing competitions held at national gatherings several times a year. This music comes from the heart. They're singing it not for historical celebration or preservation as we often do — they're singing it for the same reasons the sailors who created it did: because it feels good and brings you together.

It's hard to really know what to think of all this — what it really means, where it's going to go. All we can say for sure is — we'll be back next year!



Riverfront of Old Gdansk.