

# KRYSTYNA MARIA CHCIUK

by *Thad Trela*

She would be in a privileged seat in front of the Golden Gate Park bandshell at the first Sunday in May Polish-American observance of Poland's Constitution Day. In a military-style outfit with awarded medals and ribbons, she would take particular pleasure and pride in the costumed adult and youth ensembles as they performed folk dances. Deservedly, as she was the one who began and nurtured Polish folk dance in the San Francisco Bay area.

For that was **Krystyna Chciuk**, who died September 4, 2021, at the age of 95, and is likely best known to dancers as the founder/director of the **Lowiczanie Polish Folk Ensemble** of dancers and choir who perform at festivals locally, nationally and abroad. They performed at Changs anniversary celebrations, and veteran San Francisco folk dancers will remember her from times when she danced with Changs and the Women's Dance Circle (now San Francisco Dance Circle).

It often comes as something of a surprise when folk dancers learn about the fascinating personal histories of those who share our avocation. Krystyna Chciuk certainly is a remarkable example. She entered the Polish Underground Army at the age of 15, serving as a liaison and courier in Warsaw during its harsh German occupation. She was ultimately captured and imprisoned by the Germans for forced labor in production of munitions in Eastern Germany. Liberated in 1945, she made her way to London where she met and married a Polish pilot, Wladyslaw Chciuk. They immigrated to the United States and eventually settled in San Francisco in 1965. Although her work was as the catering manager of the prestigious San Francisco Olympic Club, her mission was Polish heritage. She was either the founder or co-founder of numerous Polish community-based organizations, including a language school and a scout troop. Lowiczanie was begun in her home in 1975 and incorporated in 1980.

In an interview in 2020 she talked about her tasks as part of the Polish Underground which included delivering pistols and ammunition stuffed in her clothing under an overcoat. Once, when resting with a friend in a



forest, a bomb fell on them. "My friend was killed, and I wasn't. That was how it was then. I don't know myself how I survived. It must have been God's will. It just wasn't my time."

"Heroes Among Us" is a YouTube video in which Krystyna tells of her life as a Prisoner of War. She concludes it with "Remember, women are great fighters."

She said her experience is a reminder to treasure your freedoms: "Don't be so complacent about your freedoms here. America is the best country, and hopefully we are away from harm's way. But freedom you have to fight for. You have to teach your children to guard it and fight for it every day."

