

Solo Swimmer

"Winter is swimming season in Maine," said Gary Sredzienski. "Ponds, rivers, and wildlife along the seacoast are a swimmer's paradise. This could be a new extreme sport, except people think it's too cold. As long as I'm moving, I'm warmer in the water than you are, shivering on the shore."



A new definition of Renaissance Man, Gary Sredzienski is a professional accordion player who finds peace in the deep.

BY JANET MENDELSON

IT WAS 15° OUTSIDE WHEN I ENTERED Gary Sredzienski's kitchen in Kittery to talk with him about everything from his collection of 66 accordions to the soundtrack to the movie *Bad News Bears* and Margaret Chase Smith. From live performances throughout New England (both solo and with his sixties rock band, The Serfs) and as host of "Polka Party" on WUNH-FM 91.3 for the past 18 years, Sredzienski is known by legions of fans as a master of the accordion, and a nonstop talking encyclopedia of ethnomusicology. I wanted to know how he came to champion the much maligned instrument; he wanted to talk about Maine's coastal creeks.

"This is the time of year I wait for," Sredzienski said. "Winter is swimming season in Maine."

When the year's first heavy snow blanketed the region last December, Sredzienski took the plunge into Spruce Creek. He described the experience this way: "It was like swimming in a margarita."

When he's in music mode, keeping up with Gary—just say "Gary" and most Kittery folks know who you mean—can be tiring. His patter runs at 100-miles-an-hour, on-stage or on-air. He's brimming with energy while he plays live accordion and old recordings of folk songs, popu-



All Sredzienski's accordions have a nickname. This one is Engelina.

lar music, and classic compositions from around the world, and shares history lessons, ethnic traditions, recipes, and letters from listeners in a throwback to 1950s radio. His radio show is the number-one fundraiser for the station at his alma mater, the University of New Hampshire (Class of 1980), he said, and its first podcast show. His listeners are everywhere. At the Golden Harvest market on Route 1, for example, where the boyish-looking 44-year-old shops for the fruits and vegetables that are the bulk of his healthy diet, the tattooed and studded staff listen loyally to his show on Saturdays from 9 to 11 a.m.

The accordion has taken Sredzienski on weekly trips throughout New England, all over the country, to the nation's capital, and eastern Europe. But I began to see another side of this engaging man when he declared, "I live in Maine to swim."

"Ponds, rivers, and wildlife along the seacoast are a swimmer's paradise," he said. "Eagles fly over my head. Loons check me out." His beloved, late dog and "business partner," Poodle, whose image appears on the label for Smuttynose Robust Porter ale, swam by his side for years. "Poody and beavers chased each other." In the creeks, Sredzienski's normally manic speed slows, literally, to a steady crawl.

Four or five days a week, 12 months a year, Gary Sredzienski swims two hours at a stretch, one mile or two or three, alone, regardless of the weather. Zero degree temperatures and icy shores are no problem.

"This could be a new extreme sport," he said, "except people think it's too cold. As long as I'm moving, even in January, I'm warmer in the water than you are, shivering on the shore." It's hard to imagine many other people braving the frigid water on a regular basis.

No sporting-goods retailer sells wet suits for swimmers like this guy, who is nearly six feet tall and solidly built, not wiry like Olympic



Janet Mendelson prev. page and right; Deb Cram above

The Flying Fingered *Solo Swimmer*

competitors. Instead, he has combined the best gear on the market for surfers and scuba divers. In summer, he wears a single-layer titanium suit. In high season, October through June, he wears shorts, a Neoprene vest with hood, a 3-mil spring wet suit, Neoprene socks, booties, and gloves, and an exterior XCEL 654 titanium-lined surfer suit made in Hawaii. A thin layer of saltwater might seep inside this double suiting, but when he pulls off the gloves the water that runs out is a toasty 90°. He smears his face with Vaseline, as English Channel swimmers do, which reduces the sting of icy saltwater and, with his winter goggles with nose guard, prevents heat loss from his face.

Sredzienski never wears swim fins. "That's cheating," he said.

Kittery's tides fluctuate nine feet in rock-strewn creeks banked by birch, oak, and pines that meet the rocky shore. Sredzienski times his swims to start against the tide, reversing midway to fly home past moorings and docks, new or dilapidated, that rest in the mud much of the day. Gulls, cormorants, and occasional herons eye this odd invader from their rocks and shallows. Sometimes he swims through salt marsh in the Rachel Carson Wildlife Refuge, where two tides converge. Always, he finds riches.

"Schools of smelt," he said, "thousands of them, part to let me through, like a curtain opening up. They're beautiful. Just beautiful. When you enter the water you are really entering into another dimension. Worldly matters, worries, and concerns have absolutely no bearing whatsoever. All that is pretty much left behind. Your mind goes into a primal survival mode.

It's almost like a mental flush. Basic survival human instinct takes over. Water temperature—how cold or warm I am—'Keep moving, Gary, to stay warm.' What creatures are in the creek beside me? Are they bigger than me? Can they hurt me? What am I going to eat when I return? What point of the tide am I swimming in? How much daylight do I have left? How many strokes am I making before I take a breath? I'm not fluster kicking enough. What direction am I heading? What moved on the bottom? What did I see?"

And there's something else. "If I enter the water with a pressing question or problem concerning my business or music," he said, "I leave the water with an answer! My subconscious mind works out its problems during the swim. The water is a world of peace. It's where I find God. When I'm in the creeks, I feel free. I feel at home."

Raised by parents who believed in rigid discipline, Sredzienski as a child found refuge in music and the out-of-doors, and in swimming: he was captain of the Enfield (Connecticut) High School swim team.

"Doing 25-yard laps in the pool," he said, "over and over to go one mile in 80° water that smells like chlorine was ridiculous. Creek swimming is altogether different. Since I began doing this regularly five years ago, it's rid my body of toxins. Now I'm addicted. I don't suffer from chronic depression like I used to."

The taste and smell of the water announce what's ahead, he said. "When I approach fresh water springs it becomes effe-

vescent and tastes like saltless potato chips. Near Route One it smells like French fries."

Follow a path enough times, and you get to know the neighbors. In Sredzienski's case, they're crabs and lobsters. He claims each has a distinct personality and a favorite place.

"They're just like people," he said. "Lobsters hang out around cinder blocks and old railroad trestles. When they sense my motion, their claws reach up from the porous mud in a friendly way. A giant lobster with claws bigger than my hand was always in the same deep pool. One day I found him in a nearby trap. Though it broke my heart, I didn't dare break the law to release him, but I've never eaten lobster again."

Visibility is especially easy in winter when life in the water has gone to bed, and it's serene, he said. No freshwater runoff or sediment enters. It's as clear and clean as looking across your living room. Once a huge eel swam by. "As I turned to watch him, he looked back at me, suspended, staring right into my eyes." Monkfish sit on the bottom and refuse to budge. Striped bass pass within inches of his body.

With a blue mesh bag tied to his waist, Sredzienski searches for lost debris that rises from the silt, here one day, gone the next. The sandy bottom shifts with the tides in byways that once served as trash dumps. In the 1700s oceangoing ships offloaded ballast where he swims, often chunks of coral, to make room for cargo. Sometimes there's cargo, too, from old shipwrecks. Gary's windowsills and basement shelves are lined with hundreds of blue, brown, and yellowed bottles, coral, and



Janet Mendelsohn

Ancient pipes, bottles, jars—the creek swimmer's reward.

pieces of white dishware with faded monograms and painted floral designs. He meticulously cleans each in an acid bath. He researches their history on the Internet and in libraries, grateful to Maine's librarians who help him identify dates and places of origin.

Etched in the clear glass of a tiny, two ounce bottle is "Foss. Liquid Fruit Flavored Syrup. Full Strength. Portland, Maine." Another bottle with raised letters: "Auburn Drug and Chemical Company." (An Auburn librarian found a newspaper ad for the product that bottle contained—a tar, blood root, and wild cherry remedy for bronchial and lung disease sold by druggists in the 1890s for 35 cents.) An unmarred, two-inch-high, white-porcelain, beehive salt shaker is still delicately painted with yellow flowers. Antique wagon parts, centuries-old handcuffs, heavy brown whiskey jugs, and perfectly legible newspaper ads for cars in the 1960s have all magically risen from the silt in like-new condition.

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“If they’re too big or heavy for my bag,” Sredzienski said, “I make a mental note to return, but by the next day, they’re gone.” Modern environmental hazards anger him, especially jet skis and golf balls.

Selling just the bottles online could be a full-time business if he were interested. Instead, his neatly organized collections of underwater artifacts are displayed alongside hundreds of record albums, volumes of accordion sheet music, and books on music history that provide material for his shows. Steel file drawers hold every handwritten Polka Party script since 1987, each in its own manila envelope. “They’re a lot of work,” he said with sigh, “like writing a term paper every week.”

Sredzienski’s stage career began at age nine at a nursing home. The next year he began traveling around New England with a vaudeville act called Weird Harold and the Hog Hollow Hooters. The rest of the band was mostly over 65. His dad plays a mean harmonica, but most of what he knows about his “ancestral music” came from his grandparents, who came to Connecticut from eastern Europe. On weekends, their friends would gather for house parties and everyone would play music and dance.

After graduating from the University of New Hampshire with a degree in forestry, Sredzienski worked for the U.S. Forest Service. He studied the effects of acid rain throughout New England and designed a forestry education program and working models for inner city youth. Meanwhile, he performed for seniors at nursing homes in Maine. During a gig at the Skowhegan library, he was introduced to a sweet old lady wearing a red rose.

“She had a glow about her that lit up the entire room,” he said. “Thinking she was the town librarian, I asked her if they had any sheet music. When I discovered she was Margaret Chase Smith, I was so embarrassed! But she was great. She invited me to play for her and her caretaker at home, which I did.” A letter from the senator is one of his proudest possessions.

When you think about Gary Sredzienski, creek swimmer and accordion player in an iPod age, it seems appropriate that he especially loves to perform for senior citizens. He’s a preservationist, a student of cultural history.

Who but Sredzienski would collect 66 accordions, some as big as a night table, others as small as a shoe box? The instruments are cherry red, ebony, pearly white, with black-and-white plastic or worn wooden keys and buttons, housed in heavy cardboard or wooden cases lined with crushed velvet. Half a dozen are strategically placed throughout the house as constant reminders for him to practice.

Sredzienski’s forte is the piano accordion, the type with a keyboard on the side. Three favorites have names. “Oxford,” a mother-of-pearl classic was built in the 1930s by Hohner in Germany, its bellows patched with leather cut from worn work gloves; its sound is perfect for Mickey Mouse cartoons. “Ed,” a 1960s model that creates sound effects—such as bird calls—was designed for a one-man-band. “Engelina,” he said, “is red diner table with mother-of-toilet-seat” from the late 1940s.

At the 2000 Smithsonian Folklife Festival Sredzienski played traditional Polish immigrant music. As a New Hampshire Artist-in-Residence, he performed the state’s music at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Sredzienski once performed for six hours straight without repeating a single number from his repertoire, which goes well beyond Greek, zydeco, Mexican, classical, swing, tango, Celtic, French Canadian, and his own original compositions. He especially loves 1930s jazz. He has performed with Ballet New England, enjoys frequent summer gigs at the Inn at Poland Springs, and travels weekly throughout New England with music and ancestral stories that keep the culture of the accordion alive. When the U.S. State Department and the state of New Hampshire sent him on a cross-country performance tour of Romania, he and “Engelina” played on Romanian national TV.

After watching Sredzienski being interviewed on the New Hampshire public television show *Crossroads*, an excited viewer sent him \$500 with a note: “Since you love to play for old folks, this is to get you started on a cross-country tour.” Sredzienski mentioned it on his show. More contributions flooded in. “The audience and fans paid for my entire 15-state tour of 93 nursing homes in five months,” he said with amazement. He received a Point of Light Award for the tour from the first President Bush.

In 2005, Paramount paid to use Sredzienski’s accordion surfing music in the bar scene in the 2005 remake of the movie *Bad News Bears*. Then they asked to use two more Polish pieces recorded on “Poland to America,” one of his five CDs. On

Valentine’s Day 2006, CBS-TV called for permission to use his original accordion number, “Tango Donati,” for *Love Monkey*, a quirky show about the alternative music scene.

“Music to me is life,” Sredzienski said. “It’s speaking in tongues. I have a passion for learning, and I’ve barely scratched the surface learning about these cultures. I earn just enough to pay my rent, but I’m richly blessed because I can share my music with others.

“Music and creek swimming,” said Gary Sredzienski. “It’s who I am.” ✨

Contributing Editor Janet Mendelsohn is a freelance writer who divides her time between Somerville, Massachusetts, and Kittery Point, Maine.

More information:

To hear Gary Sredzienski, tune in to 91.3 WUNH-FM. “Polka Party” airs Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. The show can also be accessed via www.wunh.org. More can be learned at: www.garysred.com.

DISCOGRAPHY:

GARY SREDZIENSKI AND THE SERFS

Cruisin’ the Creek; Serfin’ with the Poodle

GARY SREDZIENSKI

From Poland to America: Old Country Polish Tunes; Accordion Languages; From the Porch—Old Country Style—Traditional Polish Music of My Grandparents