

Title: Colnik Family Papers

Call Number: Mss-3084

Inclusive Dates: 1865 – 2002

Bulk: 3.0 cu. ft.

Location: NE, Sh. 034A

Historical Note:

Cyril Colnik 1871-1958: Cyril Colnik was born in Triebein/Styria Austria in 1871. His father was a veterinary surgeon and descendant of an old aristocratic family. Cyril grew up on a country estate where the famous Lippizaner horses, of the Austrian Emperor, were shod. At the age of four Cyril first learned about ironwork by forging nails for a dog house he was building.

When Cyril was fourteen he was sent to Vienna, to become an apprentice under a famous Austrian master of iron craft. He also studied with Franz Roth of the Gratz Munich Industrial School. At eighteen Cyril traveled around Europe to learn more about the art and styles of iron craft. In 1893, while studying in an art school in Munich, Cyril was recommended by the school faculty to travel to the Chicago World's Fair, (World Columbia Exposition) to work on a large clock-face in the German Exhibit. Cyril won a first prize gold medal for a wrought iron panel he created. Unfortunately, Cyril never received his metal. The Exposition ran out of funds and declared itself bankrupt.

After the exposition Cyril continued to work in Chicago for a short time and later moved to Milwaukee. Cyril was encouraged to stay in Milwaukee by Captain Frederick Pabst who hired Cyril to work on the Pabst Mansion between 1894 -1905. Cyril gained recognition for his craftsmanship and attention to detail. He was contracted to work on the Herman Uihlein mansion, (5270 N. Lake Drive) and other high-profile commissions. They included: the bronze work of the Northwestern National Insurance Company, the iron gates of Wisconsin Memorial Park, the fence of the Villa Terrance Mansion and the enormous chandelier at the Maders Restaurant. Cyril came to be called the "Tiffany" of wrought iron craftsmanship with his ornate architectural decorations: (balustrades, metal screens, andirons, grills, chandeliers and fireplace furnishings).

Cyril once said: "I came to the conclusion that a city like Milwaukee, with its great future, needed craftsmen and mechanics who would help make it as beautiful as Europe made her cities. At one time Cyril had over forty men working for him. In his eighties, Cyril was honored for his work by the Art Institute of Chicago. Cyril's first iron shop was at 201 N. 8th Street in Milwaukee. He later moved to 531 N. 8th Street where he fabricated metal almost up to his death in 1958. His collection of metal work was left to the Milwaukee Public Museum and Library.

Gretchen Colnik, 1906 – 1991: Gretchen was born in 1906, the only child of Cyril and Marie Colnik. She attended Marquette University and was active in the school newspaper, (*Tribune*),

the Shakespeare Club, the school yearbook (Hilltop), Theta Sigma Phi, and Gamma Phi Epsilon. She performed on WHAD radio with the noted singer: Hildegard and modeled for “Selected in Milwaukee Shops.” In 1928 Gretchen graduated from Marquette with a degree in Journalism. She moved to Great Neck New York to where she became the managing editor for a weekly newspaper, *The News*. While in New York, Gretchen attended courses in drama and interior design.

In 1941 Gretchen’s mother (Marie Colnik) died. Gretchen returned to Milwaukee to assist her father and began teaching a class called “Woman’ Point of View” at Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) and evening classes for the Wauwatosa School District. The course included information about current events, fashion, home decorating, and crafts. MATC attempted to cancel the course, citing that the course had no set curriculum and did not prepare students for any vocation. Student protests postponed the decision and the class continued for a short time.

Gretchen’s notoriety led to her own television program. From 1952 to 1966 Gretchen hosted “The Gretchen Colnik Show” on WTMJ-TV Channel 4 and WISN-TV Channel 12 with the same sponsor: Mrs. Karl’s Bread. The show provided advice on interior design, crafts and conducted interviews. Gretchen’s special trade make was her fashionable hat collection and always appeared in public wearing a distinctive hat. She lectured for Woman’s Clubs and was member of civic organizations: (Better Film Council, Milwaukee Mother’s Club, Milwaukee Art Institute Garden Club and Redeemer Evangelical Lutheran Church). Gretchen became a world traveler, making seven trips to Russia and thirteen trips to Europe. Some of these trips were organized and sponsored by Gretchen, where she acted as a tour organizer and guide.

After the death of her father in 1958 Gretchen opened up her home to educate children, civic groups, artists and friends to display the artistic metal work of her father. She called it her Cinderella House. Gretchen’s conviction was that woman shape the United States through education in home and community. She was honored by a large testimonial dinner where Mayor Frank P. Zeidler spoke of Gretchen’s deep sense of humanity for Milwaukee and the world. She left over a million dollars to Marquette University to establish “The Gretchen and Cyril Colnik Endowed Chair” in Marquette’s College of Communication, Journalism and Performing Arts.

Abstract: The collection is comprised of newspaper articles, photographs, letters, pamphlets, professional papers, video tapes, about audio cassettes Cyril and Gretchen Colnik

Administrative Note: The collection was processed on July 23, 2007 by Carl Osman. Material donated by the Milwaukee Public Library was processed and added by Kevin Abing, December 2018.

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CYRIL COLNIK MATERIAL		
Newspaper Clippings/Articles, 1908-2004	1	1
Cyril Colnik Programs/Exhibitions	1	2

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– Includes autograph book, ca. 1865-1880 (most in German)		
GRETCHEN COLNIK MATERIAL		
Articles by Gretchen Colnik	1	4
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Biographies and Obituaries	1	6
Cards and Letters	1	7
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Colnik Family – Business Records, 1950-1960	2	22
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PHOTOGRAPHS		
Cyril and Maria Colnik	3	1
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Gretchen Colnik, 1920s-1940s	3	3
Gretchen Colnik, 1950s-1960s	3	4
Gretchen Colnik, 1970s-1991	3	5
Gretchen Colnik, undated photos	3	6
Gretchen Colnik – Tours and Travel	3	7
Gretchen Colnik – Family Gatherings/Special Events	3	8
Gretchen Colnik – Funeral/Memorial, 1991 & Miscellaneous Slides/Negatives	3	9
OVERSIZE MATERIAL	LOCATION	
<i>Popular Home's Pak of Ideas for Home Improvement and New Home Planning</i>	NE, Sh. 034A	
Gretchen Colnik Home Decorating Scrapbooks	NE, Sh. 034A	
Gretchen Colnik Scrapbook of Newspaper Clippings (primarily obituaries)	NE, Sh. 034A	
VHS Tapes (Transferred to Multimedia Collection)		
<i>Doorways to the Past Wrought Iron Artistry by Cyril Colnik 1871-1958</i>		
<i>Forged Elegance: The Lifework of Master Blacksmith Cyril Colnik</i>		

Audio Cassettes (Transferred to Multimedia Collection)	
Gretchen Colnik: WEZW 11/19/84	
Rev, Ensworth Reisner: Tribute to Cyril Colnik, WISN 10/28/58	
Records (Transferred to Multimedia Collection)	
<i>Hidegarde's Souvenir Record Album (33 1/3 RPM)</i>	
Gretchen Colnik TV Program (2) 78 RPM Records	