A Call to Prayer (Intro/A)

As Dr. Karen Majewski (My-ev-ski) drove up to the small brick city hall building in Hamtramck, Michigan on April 13, 2004, she noticed a number of news trucks parked out front. “ABC, NBC, Fox News, that’s not a good omen, you know.”1 Just a few months prior, Majewski became president of the city council: she still considered herself a reluctant newcomer to politics. At the sight of the news trucks, Majewski recalled: “You want to keep driving and head over the Ambassador Bridge (to Canada).” Yet she knew instantly why the press had gathered in her tiny city: the broadcast of the call to prayer.

When Majewski moved to Michigan for graduate school, she wanted to find an ethnic urban neighborhood like her hometown of Chicago: a front-porch community where she would hear different languages spoken on the street. For a scholar specializing in immigration and ethnicity, Hamtramck was “the only perfect place.” Her years in academia are often reflected in her speech, self-possessed demeanor, and her personal style: she wears her long hair in a stylish bun and carefully selects vintage clothing and subtle touches of ethnic jewelry. Just before Majewski was drafted to run for city council, she completed her Ph.D. and published a book on Polish-American identity. She had no political aspirations beyond her work on the city’s historical commission, yet she welcomed being part of a shift away from “the Polish old guard” to a progressive, new urbanism agenda.

Hamtramck is just over 2.1 square miles and home to nearly 25,000 people: today, it is the most densely populated and the most internationally diverse city in the state. “It really is an old school urban neighborhood … with houses on 30-foot lots, right next to each other. We live on top of each other.” Hamtramck shares a zip code, and most of its border, with Detroit. Both cities grew and thrived along with the auto industry; today, both are in emergency management with deep financial woes. Majewski described Hamtramck as “gritty and hardscrabble” but added that the economic challenges of the city are longstanding: “We’re down but we’re not out. That could be our slogan,” she laughs.

Today, the city’s official slogan is: “A Touch of the World in America.” Hamtramck saw earlier waves of German, French, and Ukrainian immigrants, and a well-established African American population, before the Poles began settling in Hamtramck. For more than five decades, the city has been predominantly Polish, from its churches and bakeries to its festivals: every mayor has been Polish. Newer waves of immigrants came from Yemen, Bosnia, and Bangladesh in recent years. By 2004, nearly one third of Hamtramck’s population was estimated to be Muslim,2 with three mosques in the city’s 2.1 square miles.

Majewski heard the call to prayer regularly back when she lived just a few blocks over the Hamtramck line in Detroit. “It seemed like a nice thing. I liked hearing the call…. Really, I marvel at my naïveté now.” When the city council received the request to broadcast the call to prayer from Al-Islah Islamic Center, a predominantly Bangladeshi mosque, Majewski thought it would be a “simple administrative process” to amend the existing noise ordinance. “I think, to most of us, it was already allowed by the constitution, and the question was ‘how do we do this in a way that works for the community?’” Yet public hearings drew increasing numbers of residents, rising emotions, and the presence of the media. Some expressed concerns about unwanted noise and proselytizing; supporters compared the call to the sounding of church bells. She explained, “You know it’s one thing for NBC to come in, and they have a story they want to tell, and they want drama and divisiveness, and

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conflict.” But for people living in a small city, Majewski understood that the broadcast of the call to prayer was more complex than any sound bite.

This is your street, and your house, and your window that’s open that’s hearing this. And your neighbors, the old Polish lady that you grew up with died and her kids sold the house to a woman in a burqa, you know. I have a lot of sympathy for the human drama, the individual drama, of dealing with those kinds of changes and issues. For the people who opposed the call, I had a lot of sympathy: individually, psychically, dealing with their world changing around them. That’s a profoundly sympathetic position.

She added:

And the immigrants coming in who want the community they live in to reflect themselves, and feel at home in that community: they are making their home literally in front of us, building a home and building a community and building an identity... You come to a place where you don’t know the language, the terrain is different, the houses are different … every little aspect of your life is changed. That is such a brave thing to do, and such a hopeful thing to do.

What she thought would be a “practical matter” had suddenly become national news. On that April night which marked the first public hearing on the noise ordinance, Majewski focused on staying calm and giving everyone a chance to speak. She recalled: “I felt profoundly challenged and stressed to do this right. Really, to do it in a way that brought honor to who we are as a city.” She steeled herself for what would come next.

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**Text of the Call to Prayer (adhān) from On Common Ground: World Religions in America**

(Arabic transliteration) *Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!*

*Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!*

*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah.*

*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa Allah.*

*Ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasulu Allah.*

*Ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasulu Allah.*

*Hayya 'ala al-salah. Hayya 'ala al-salah.*

*Hayya 'ala al-falah. Hayya 'ala al-falah.*

*Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!*

*La ilaha illa Allah.*
(translation) God is most Great! God is most Great!

God is most Great! God is most Great!

I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.

I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.

I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

I bear witness that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.

Come to prayer. Come to prayer.

Come to success. Come to success.

God is most Great! God is most Great!

There is no God but Allah.\textsuperscript{3}

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**Endnotes**

\textsuperscript{1} All quotes from Karen Majewski: Karen Majewski, interview by author, Hamtramck, Michigan, August 11, 2014.

