

**Anne M. Gurnack**

University of Wisconsin-Parkside

gurnack@uwp.edu

**KASHUBIANS AND THE CHURCH IN THREE  
WISCONSIN SETTLEMENTS: JONES ISLAND  
MILWAUKEE, STEVENS POINT,  
AND PINE CREEK/DODGE WISCONSIN**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper will discuss the historic connections between three Kashubs settlements and Catholic churches in Milwaukee, Stevens Point, and Pine Creek/Dodge Wisconsin. These churches from the 1800's served as important links to these communities. The Kashubian immigrants were loyal and important contributors to founding, growth and development of these fervent communities in abundant ways. This article will address these links and activities that existed in the 1800's following the arrival of Polish/Kashubs immigrants.

Polish immigrants have celebrated many loyalties to various institutions, but the connection they established to Catholic churches stands out as particularly vigorous. Much has been written about their relationship to religion, but less attention has been focused on that of Kashubian Poles.

Kashubian Poles exerted back breaking efforts to build stunning churches and religious communities as vital components of their "native realm" or ethnic self-definition process. (Milosz, 1968). This paper will highlight the significant contributions to churches in three Kashubian settlements including Jones Island, Milwaukee, Stevens Point, and Pine Creek, Dodge Wisconsin. This paper will address three questions:

Who are the Kashubs? Where did they come from and why?

What are the major Kashubian settlements in Wisconsin and their connections to Catholic Churches?

How were these settlements alike and how were they different?

**Keywords:**

Wisconsin Kashub Settlements Churches.

## WHO ARE THE KASHUBS

The Kashubs are most often identified as a regional ethnic group with remnants from ancient Baltic West traditions, language and culture. Their distinct language has characteristic Polish, German, and Nordic influences. The group members are found predominantly from the Pomeranian region of Northern Poland, adjacent to the Baltic Sea. For many generations their ethnic identity was questioned and subjected to many forms of oppression. Hence their exit to the new world was not unexpected and encouraged by many agents (F.R. Lorentz et. al, 1935).

In the mid nineteenth century economic and political pressures created an environment that encouraged many inhabitants of this region to leave their homes and emigrate to the United States, Canada and Brazil (Rekowski, 1996). Poland no longer remained a sovereign nation as of 1795, divided into partitions belonging to Prussia, Russia and Austria. Kashubia remained under Prussian control nearly until 1920 after World War I.

During the 1800's many inhabitants of this region were motivated by several factors that influenced their decision to start a new life, particularly to the United States. During the middle of the century, Pomeranian Poles left due to deleterious economic conditions and wished a better life and were actually encouraged to leave by offers of inexpensive travel to North America. After the 1850's their departures dominated by other motives such as emerging negative Prussian influence, particularly the oppressive *Kulturkampf* policies of Bismarck. For example, it soon was discouraged to speak the Kashubian language and to offer religious instruction in government schools. And many young men feared being drafted into Prussian military service. These policies severely affected religious, as well as governmental, and educational dimensions of their lives (Borzyszkowski, 2011; Perkowski, January-June 1966). The current map of the Kashubian region of Poland is shown below. Hel Peninsula is shown jutting out from the Polish coast, near Gdansk.



as a model for the establishment of the Milwaukee fishing village. He returned home to Prussian occupied Poland and encouraged neighbors, friends and family members to move to the United States and settle there. Jones Island had been named after a ship builder who inhabited the area many years prior to Struck's arrival. In the early 1870's groups of Kashubian fishermen from villages such as Jastarnia, Chłupy, and Hel arrived on Jones Island and quickly developed a prosperous fishing village. By 1890 the fishing village consisted of over 1600 inhabitants, mostly Kashubs but also including some Germans and Norwegians.

Unfortunately, Valentin Struck died shortly after his arrival, and the task of settling Jones Island was taken over by others, namely Jakub Muza. Muza, a grocer, managed to initiate the settlement of numerous families who thought the land was free or believed that they had purchased certain parcels. Valentin's son, Felix was born on the island and assumed a leadership position there as a saloon keeper in his adulthood. The complex issues related to deeded ownership and rights to this property would soon be called into question by groups such as the Illinois Steel Company and the City of Milwaukee.

However, these settlers were also to experience discriminatory behaviors by mainlander Milwaukee Polish immigrants who had arrived there previously. Unfortunately, these fisherman families continued to be treated as undesirable residents as they attempted to establish their new homes at Jones Island. But the fishing village itself thrived even as conditions on the island were harsh. There were no paved roads on the island and initially there were no schools. Eventually, a school room was installed where local children could be educated to the level of third grade. Many unsanitary conditions existed on the island and deaths resulted from diseases and ship accidents occurring on the waters of Lake Michigan. (Anne M. Gurnack, et.al. 2019)

## **EVICTON OF KASHUBIAN FISHERMEN SQUATTERS**

As the populations of Jones Island fishermen increased, their small size boats presented a nuisance to the neighboring Illinois Steel Company which shared the area. In fact, many Jones Island inhabitants were employed by the company which considered the fishermen "squatters." The steel company initiated over eighty lawsuits with the intent of removing these "illegal settlers" from their homes. The proceedings for these legal actions were lengthy and complicated, often lasting many years. The fishermen countered these efforts with strong defenses, often aided by lawyers financed by the Socialist party of Milwaukee. A few of the lawsuits were won by the fisher-

men through the defense of “adverse possession”, meaning that were able to prove they had inhabited their property for twenty consecutive years. Concomitant with these lawsuits, the City of Milwaukee also entered these disputes wishing to expand the existing harbor. The city finally condemned the property and most of the Jones Island settlers departed. Financial settlements in the amount of \$100,000 were arranged for both the Illinois Steel Company (one third) and the Jones Island families (two thirds.). By the 1940s all the Jones Island inhabitants had moved to make way for the new harbor and the sanitation plant. Many years later in the 1970s, Milwaukee named a small area on the island “Kaszube Park” where fisherman descendants meet each year on the first Saturday in August to celebrate their heritage.

### **JONES ISLAND KASHUBS AND ST STANISLAUS CHURCH**

St. Stanislaus Bishop and Martyr Church dates from 1866 and is often cited as one of the oldest urban Polish Catholic places of worship in the United States. Poles and Kashubian Poles worshiped there and contributed one month’s salary for the construction and development of the structure. St. Stan’s is considered the “mother” church when other congregations such as St. Hyacinth, St Hedwig’s, and the spectacular St. Josephat Basilica appeared in later years when this small religious community could no longer meet the needs of the ever-expanding Polish immigration to this emerging industrial city (Mikos, 2012; Kruszka, 2001). Milwaukee’s urban landscape provided a multitude of employment opportunities for these new arrivals in factories, and small business opportunities related to the world of fishing. The city was additionally engaged in meatpacking, brewing, tanning, milling, iron and steel processing, and manufacturing.

Many legends survive which document the vast contributions of the Kashubian fishermen to the church. One such story involves the contribution of a gentleman named Anthony Kochanek who offered up his valued gold watch to be raffled off for the amount of two hundred fifty dollars which provided much needed startup funds for the early construction of the building. The current St. Stanislaus building is pictured on the following page. Many of the original families, including a number of Kashubs, donated one month of their meager salaries to purchase a small wooden Lutheran Church for the sum of four thousand dollars on South 5<sup>th</sup> and West Mineral streets. (Waligorski, 1946).

Another critical story that is the often reported concerns the “Rood Beam!” that surmounted the crucifix and was presented to the church around

1893. That year was characterized by violent storms that swept through the country. The city of Milwaukee was not spared, and much damage was reported throughout the urban area, including Jones Island. Many boats were wrecked, but one beam was saved from a ship that was later donated to St. Stanislaus Church. This beam remains there today as a testament to the strength and courage of the Jones Island Kashubian fishermen.



Courtesy of St. Stanislaus Church, Historic Mitchell St., Milwaukee, Wisconsin

A more recent example of Kashubian generosity dates from the 1960's when the church was renovated substantially. Statues of a number of saints were financed by a number of Jones Island fishermen descendant families. However, these figures are not to found in the church today.

Since 2016, St. Stanislaus Church has celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary and has undergone major renovations to restore it to original form. The mass service is often said in Latin as well as Spanish as the congregation is composed of other than Polish congregation members. (Gurda, 2007). Many of the original Polish immigrants have moved to nearby neighborhoods in the

city (Gate of Heaven, St Stanislaus Parish of 100 years, 1866-2016, 2016). Today's church remains a "designated religious community" where worshippers travel many miles to attend services from other areas of the city and region.



St. Stanislaus Church, Milwaukee Wisconsin, Courtesy of the US National Park Service. Public Domain Image

## **STEVENS POINT AND SACRED HEART CHURCH OF POLONIA**

Political and economic conditions very similar to those that shaped the Milwaukee Jones Island immigrants can be applied to those in Portage County, Wisconsin. Further, many young men were encouraged to depart their homeland for fear of being forced to serve in the military. (Sanford, 1907). Those who arrived there, however, came from other villages in Kashubia than the Jones Island fishermen, and moved into a different set of occupations which surrounded this rural settlement. But religious loyalties to

the development of the Sacred Heart Catholic in Polonia church were similar to the Milwaukee urban settlement, some 155 miles away south.

Stevens Point is the center of Portage County which was only composed of about 1500 residents in 1860. Today the population is about 27,000. The church history of the area was both turbulent and fascinating.



Sacred Heart Church Image Courtesy of Portage County Historical Society, Stevens Point, Wisconsin, Public Domain Image

### **THE FIRST ARRIVALS**

1857 was particularly significant for the Koziyczkowski family as Michael and Frances, accompanied by their nine children, left their tiny Kashubian village of Podjazy in the Kartuzy district of Poland where this

ancient group had lived hundreds of years. The family had noble origins but felt ambivalent about leaving their “native realm,” only 75 miles from the Baltic Coast. The local church had been a vital source of stability for them, their neighbors, and the entire community. Their departure was novel, almost shocking to local residents that it was announced by the pastor during a church service. Years later, some parishioners were present at that historic church service were surprised to meet up with Kozięczkowski on the main streets of Stevens Point, Wisconsin. The departure of the family was made easier as they most likely boarded a recently installed train, leaving Prussian-occupied Poland for the unknown new world in Portage County Wisconsin (Rosholt, 1959). Of course, they had heard stories of life in this new world boasting of cheap land available in the mid-west. But for the most part, this venture was terrifying. In Podjazzy the villagers were mostly farmers who made their living through the production of wheat, rye, and potatoes for everyday meals and occasionally for vodka as well as other products. Interestingly, several other Kashubians first came to Canada with the promise of free land, but discovered farming was almost impossible there and therefore moved on to the Stevens Point area (Blank, 2016). Michael Kozięczkowski himself had initially ventured to Marathon County adjacent to Portage County but decided to return to the village of Sharon. Other families who followed Michael and Frances to Wisconsin from Kashubia were not of noble background, but farmers who were attracted to the land to purchase after the Civil War. Adeline Sopa, the beloved local Kashubian historian notes that the second group of new arrivals included the families of Adam Klesmit (Kleinschmidt), Joseph Platta, and John Zynda arriving in Portage County in 1858. Within twenty years over 150 families had settled the area. (Goc, 1992; Sopa, May 1996). Polonia or “Little Poland” as it came to be called and a mere 10 miles from Stevens Point, is often cited as one of the earliest Kashubs/Kashubian settlements in the United States. (First Polish Settled in Point in 1860, 1958) The Kashubian Poles were also equipped with well-developed logging skills which sustained them economically in addition to agricultural pursuits.

### **SACRED HEART CHURCH IN POLONIA: THE MOTHER CHURCH**

Shortly after their arrival in the mid 1850’s, the Kashubian/Polish settlers set out to establish their own religious community. Initially the attended Catholic masses at St. Mark’s Church with other Irish and German ethnic groups. However, this arrangement proved unsatisfactory and conflict

emerged due to a number of concerns, the most noteworthy involving language and cultural differences. They simply wanted a church of their own.

Eventually, a petition was approved to establish a Polish Church which was constructed in "Little Poland," in a community known presently as Ellis. However, a new set of problems surfaced as the little wooden church named after St. Joseph was located adjacent to several taverns. While the farmers came to town on Sundays and made sure that their wives and children attended mass, they proceeded to make heavy use of the drinking facilities. In fact, they were quite loud and boisterous, making religious services almost impossible to conduct. The frustrated pastor Father Dabowski, unable to negotiate with the saloon keepers, dismantled and moved the church to a new community named appropriately, "Polonia!" The new church was named Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin, and sometime later renamed Sacred Heart as it is still known today. Father Dabowski also was responsible for the invitation and arrival of the Felician sisters from Kraków who were the founders of a parochial school that provided high quality educational needs of youngsters in the region.

There was still no peace for the new church as it was burned to the ground along with the rectory around 1875. Foul play was suspected but never proved. The persistent pastor built a new stone church in 1876 which stands today, composed of a substantive congregation which would become the largest rural Catholic Church in the United States. A visit to the church cemetery reveals hundreds of memorials displaying well known Kashubian names. While their specific contributions are not identified, their influences were monumental. Regretfully, the Kashubians of Portage County perhaps were concerned less about maintaining their ethnic identity than blending in with other Poles and ethnic groups. They often thought of themselves as "lower class Poles." (Goc, 1992, pp. 10-22). In contrast the Kashubian fishermen of Jones Island proudly celebrated and maintained their ethnic differences throughout the years. Similarly, the Kashubian community members which will be described next in Pine Creek, Wisconsin and Winona, Minnesota doggedly honored their heritage.

### **PINE CREEK, WISCONSIN AND WINONA, MINNESOTA**

The Madry and Bronk families are believed to be the first arrivals in Winona, Minnesota around 1859, which had a population of 2500 around that time. The family was followed by thousands of other Kashubians who emigrated from Bytów and other towns in search of farmland. Unable to find

appropriate land for farming, these immigrants moved on to a nearby village of Pine Creek/Dodge Wisconsin a few miles away. But they maintained strong emotional ties to Winona where many found employment in the local sawmills. (The Kashubian Polish Community of Southeastern Wisconsin, 2001). These settlers were very familiar with logging skills, having mastered them well back in Poland. Winona today has a population of about 28,000 and has similar characteristics to Stevens Point, Wisconsin and is only a few hours apart, some 160 miles. So, there were multiple interaction and communications between the two settlements. (Curtiss-Wedge, 1917). But the Pine Creek/Winona area was truly dominated by Kashubs in the tune of over 6000 of them. Many call the area the “Kashubian Capital of America!” (First Settlement in Winona: 1859).

But it is truly the Pine Creek Kashubians and a small percentage of Bohemian immigrants that we owe gratitude for the established of the church in 1862 according to the distinguished author Anne Pellowski. She has written over 18 children’s books documenting Kashubian culture and traveled the world, a UNICEF globetrotter, teaching others the art of telling a story. (Napierkowski, 1985).

The author of this paper had the opportunity to meet and interview Anne Pellowski in October, 2018 in Winona, Minnesota. With her permission I am including a direct quote from that interview that pertains to the arrival of her great grandparents to the area and the establishment of Sacred Heart Church in Pine Creek, Wisconsin in 1862.

‘My ancestors on my father’s side came from the town of Szwedzki Ostrow (Swedish Island), but actually on a peninsula jutting out in Lake Wyrownno, near Lipusz. My mother came from the village of Niezabyszewo. They had many relatives in the area, especially near Koscierzyna and Ugoszcz. My great, great grandfather Pellowski, came on the ship “Donau,” from Hamburg on August 25, 1859.

Most made their way down the Ohio and connected to the Mississippi in Dubuque, Iowa. From there they went up-river to Winona. I suspect there was one early arrival who told the lumbering companies, desperate for labor, that there were many Kashubian families who knew how to handle lumber similar to what existed in Wisconsin. The companies worked in direct connection with the Hamburg America line to offer special rates that booked the people straight to Winona. I have seen ads of the Hamburg America Line at the time, placed in the Kashubian newspapers, which offered these special fares and pretty much a guaranteed job when they arrived...

The reason they settled on the Wisconsin side of the river was the quality of the soil – it was much more similar to that they were used to in their homeland.

There were Bohemians (Czechs) arriving at the same time and since their language was similar, they wanted a church that spoke their language.

It is interesting to note that many of the men who signed the petition to the bishop could actually sign their own name. I am almost sure that my great grandfather was the one who wrote out the document. His was the first signature on the document. We know that he was literate as he spent a year in the seminary before leaving and marrying....” (Pellowski, October 2018).

The church, called Sacred Heart – Saint Wenceslaus, dedicated in 1864, was small wooden building was made up of approximately 85 per cent Kashubians. One can therefore probably identify the church as the oldest religious facility of predominantly Kashubians parishioners. By 1875 there existed a newer brick building on the hill which overlooks the modern-day church. The parish is very much still active and serves families in the community of 500. Pine Creek’s population never grew to become a substantial city and many residents moved on to Winona, Minnesota across the river where plentiful opportunities existed. After some years, the Basilica of St. Stanislaus Kostka appeared and a new building was dedicated in 1895 which was to serve a much larger number of Polish/Kashubian worshippers as many moved to the larger city, especially numerous newly arrived from the Silesia. (Galewski, Vol. XV).

This review would not be complete without highlighting the monumental contributions of two individuals who dedicated their lives to the continued cultivation and preservation of Kashubian culture and history there. The first distinguished gentleman was Hieronim Derdowski (1852-1902), poet, newspaper editor, intellectual, and political activist who contributed immensely to the continued importance of Kashubian identity. (Ochrymowycz, 1981).

Secondly, Father Paul Breza purchased an old lumber mill in downtown Winona and diligently with great care turned it into a museum which houses both important Polish and Kashubian artifacts. (Olson, 2015).



Sacred Heart Church of Pine Creek, Wisconsin

## **ETHNIC REVIVAL IN THE US AND IN POLAND**

While attention has been directed in this paper on Kashubian settlements in the Midwest of the United States, this attention has been reinforced by an interest in ethnic revival throughout the country among nearly all groups in the last few decades. The reader should note that a similar awakening has also appeared in Poland. This renewed interest in Kaszube ethnic identity development is well documented by the important recent work of Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński, Tomasz Wicherkiewicz, and Józef Borzyszkowski (Obracht-Prondzynski et.al., 2011). Their work critically analyses the major contributors to the development of Kashubian history and culture as well as the museums and organizations which house relevant artifacts.

### **Summary**

This paper has discussed the connections between three Wisconsin Kashubian settlements and the churches they helped established. These religious institutions were important to them as symbols of their Catholic faith as well as pillars which helped support and maintain their ethnic identity for many decades. Many of the Kashubs eventually melted into the various

Polish communities but others such as Pine Creek and Jones Island celebrated their heritage with the assistance of certain important local leaders.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Blank, J. C. (2016). *Creating Kashubia: History, Memory and Identity in America's First Polish Community*. Montreal: McGill Queens University Press.
- [2] Borzyszkowski, J. (2011). A History of the Kashubs Until the End of Communism. In C. O.-P. (Eds.), *The Kasubs: Past and Present* (pp. 5-74). London: Peter lang Publishers.
- [3] Curtiss-Wedge, F. (1917). *History of Trempealeau County*. Chicago: H.C. Cooper, Inc. and Company.
- [4] F.R. Lorentz, A. F. (1935). *The Cassubian Civilization*. London, England: Faber Publishers.
- [5] First Polish Settled in Point in 1860. (1958, June 28). *Stevens Point Daily Journal*. (n.d.). *First Settlement in Winona: 1859*. <http://bambenek.org/winona>.
- [6] Galewski, R. (Vol. XV, Fall). Minnesota has Two Basilicas. *Friends of the Kashubian People*, p. 4.
- [7] *Gate of Heaven, St Stanislaus Parish of 100 years, 1866-2016*. (2016). Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Self-Published.
- [8] Goc, M. J. (1992). *Native Realm: The Polish American Community of Portage County 1857-1992*. Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Worzalla Publishing Company.
- [9] Gurda, J. (2007). *Cream City Chronicles: Stories of Milwaukee's Past*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Historical Society Press.
- [10] Gurnack A. M., A. K.-S. (2019). The Saga of the Jones Island Kaszube Fishermen Returns to Poland in 2017. *Polish American Studies*, 84-90.
- [11] Kruszka, W. (2001). *History of the Poles to the US Until 1908 Part IV*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press.
- [12] Mikos, S. (2012). *Poles in Wisconsin*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin State Historical Society Press.
- [13] Milosz, C. (1968). *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc.
- [14] Napierkowski, T. J. (1985). Anne Pellowski: A Voice for Polonia. *Polish American Studies*.

- [15] Ochrymowycz, L. M. (1981). Derkowski and Pacholski. In G. D. (ed), *Winona, Minnesota: The Polish Heritage* (pp. 51-62).
- [16] Olson, D. (2015, July 27). Priest Breathes Life into Winona's Polish History. *Minnesota Public Radio News*.
- [17] Pellowski, A. (October 2018). *Personal Interview*. Winona Minnesota.
- [18] Perkowski, J. (January-June 1966). The Kashubs: Origins and Immigration to the United States. *Polish American Studies*, 23:1.
- [19] Rekowski, F. A. (1996). *Saga of the Kashu People of Poland, Canada, USA*. Saskatoon: Self Published.
- [20] Rosholt, M. (1959). *Our Country Our Story:Portage County Wisconsin*. Stevens Point, Wisconsin: Portage County Board of Supervisors.
- [21] Sanford, A. H. (1907). *Polish People of Portage County*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin State Historical Society.
- [22] Sopa, A. M. (May 1996). The Kaszuby Region: Home of the Polish Pioneers of Portage County. *Journal of the Polish Genealogical Society of America*.
- [23] *The Kashubian Polish Community of Southeastern Wisconsin*. (2001). Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing Company.
- [24] Waligorski, F. A. (1946). St. Stanislaus Parish. In T. Borun, *We the Milwaukee Poles 1846-1946*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Nowiny Publishing company.
- [25] Wicheriewicz, C. O.-P. (2011). *The Kashubs Past and Present*. Oxford: Peter Lang Publishers.

## **KASZUBI I KOŚCIÓŁ W TRZECH OSIEDLACH WISCONSIN: JONES ISLAND MILWAUKEE, STEVENS POINT I PINE CREEK / DODGE WISCONSIN**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

W tym artykule zostaną omówione historyczne powiązania między trzema kaszubskimi osadami a kościołami katolickimi w Milwaukee, Stevens Point i Pine Creek/Dodge Wisconsin. Te kościoły z 1800 roku służyły jako ważne łączniki do tych społeczności. Kaszubscy

imigranci byli lojalnymi i ważnymi uczestnikami tworzenia, wzrostu i rozwoju tych żarliwych społeczności na wiele sposobów. W tym artykule zostaną omówione te powiązania i aktywności które istniały w 1800 roku po przybyciu Polskich / Kaszubskich imigrantów. Polscy imigranci obchodzili oddanie wielu różnym instytucją, ale związek jaki ustanowili z kościołami Katolickimi wyróżniał się szczególnym wigorem. Wiele napisano o ich związku z religią, ale mniej uwagi poświęcono Polakom kaszubskim. Kaszubszy Polacy podjęli ciężkie wysiłki, aby zbudować wspaniałe kościoły i religijne wspólnoty jako istotne elementy ich „ojczystego królestwa” lub etnicznego procesu samookreślenia. (Miłosz, 1968). Ten artykuł podkreśli znaczący wkład w kościoły w trzech osadach kaszubskich, w tym w Jones Island, Milwaukee, Stevens Point i Pine Creek, Dodge Wisconsin. Ten artykuł postawi trzy pytania: Kim są Kaszubi? Skąd oni pochodzą i dlaczego? Jakie są główne osady kaszubskie w Wisconsin i ich powiązania z Kościołami katolickimi? Jak wyglądały te osady i jak się różniły?

Słowa kluczowe:

Wisconsin, Kaszub, osady, kościoły.