

DROBNE ECHA

By Greg Kishel

Series Introduction

With this issue we inaugurate a new series of articles that I hope will be of interest to regional historians and the local Polish-American cultural groups as well as our genealogical community. In the years when Minnesota had a substantial and far-flung population of Polish immigrants, it supported two Polish-language newspapers: Winona's *Wiarus* (retitled for a brief time as *Katolik*) and *Nowiny Minnesockie* out of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Some years back, the Minnesota Historical Society microfilmed the extant runs of both. The results are available at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul; individual rolls can be obtained at other locations via the Inter-Library Loan system.

I was unaware of the research value of these newspapers until October, 2000, when John Radziłowski gave a presentation on the secular rituals of rural Minnesota's Polonia to the PGS-MN.¹ During an intensive search of the filmed run of *Wiarus*, John had discovered a trove of locally-generated correspondence and reportage from the four corners of Minnesota. Much of it was quite colorful and detailed in its preservation of the early life of the immigrant communities. John compiled a list of all of this journalism over the time that *Wiarus* featured it, from 1885 to about 1914.

I had intended to ask John to give me a hand on my own research into the early years of Northeastern Minnesota's Polonia, but our PGS-MN colleague Ray Marshall beat me to it. With John's help, Ray assembled copies of *Wiarus* correspondence that had been by-lined in St. Louis, Carlton, and Pine Counties in Minnesota and Douglas County in Wisconsin, and a few scattered items from elsewhere in Minnesota. Ray very graciously made multiple copies of the set to deposit at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota, the Northeast Minnesota History Center at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, and our own PGS-MN library collection.

He also started an index-table for the set, and asked

¹John's presentation came out of one he gave to the Polish American Historical Association earlier in 2000, at its annual meeting in Kraków. John used many of his findings in a fine illustrated article on Minnesota's early rural Polish settlements, published recently in the Spring, 2002 issue of *Minnesota History*, at pp. 16-28

for my help in ascertaining the content of the articles. As I began skimming the items with the aid of *Wielki Słownik Polsko-Angielski* and *Teach Yourself Polish*, I got very excited about their potential. Here, it seemed, was a century-old mother-lode of forgotten chronicles, buried in a language now lost to the descendants of their authors and subjects.

The articles divided into at least four different types by content: current reportage of routine local events, religious and secular; lengthy recountings of then-recent history, mostly centered around the first Poles' arrival and the foundation of their parishes; "travelogue" pieces describing the physical environments, economies, and broader communities in which the Poles had settled; and argumentative commentaries on politics and activities within their parishes and fraternal organizations. Once in awhile the text was very hard to wade through, with difficult sentence structure and unfamiliar literary or Biblical references. More often, the writing style was straightforward, adjusting for the tendency to use run-on sentences. With patience and a good dictionary, such material would be accessible enough to one with a middling self-taught grasp of written Polish.

Some of the articles--especially the polemical ones--were by-lined with assumed pen-names, presenting a neat puzzle for researchers more familiar with the makeup of the communities from which they sprang. In many, however, the authors identified themselves by name or age or occupation. A time or two I found myself admiring the pluck of a female correspondent, probably of teen age, doing the duty of a deceased mother on an isolated farmstead or on the iron frontier of the Vermilion Range, but willing to tell others about it in print. Clearly, there were some very vital, human stories locked away here.

I decided that uncovering and sharing this material was squarely within our society's mission, and that I would be the agent of doing so. A regular column would be the vehicle, each installment focused on a particular town. A series heading came to me while I pored over Ray's compilation. Hieronim Derdowski, *Wiarus*'s editor, had run regular compilations of very short items of Polonian reportage under the title *Drobne Echa*--"Little Echoes." I decided I would revive this very evocative title to honor him for preserving the material in the first place.²

²Our sister organization, the Polish American Cultural Institute of Minnesota, did much the same several years ago when it resurrected the title *Nowiny Minnesockie* for its newsletter.

After spending some time on selected articles from Ray's *Wiarus* compilation, I decided to branch out a bit. When I combed through the list of the IHRC's microfilm holdings of Polish-language newspapers from across the country, I noticed a title identified to St. Paul, of which I had been ignorant--*Stońce*, "The Sun." When I inspected it, I found that it had been the newspaper of the fledgling Polish Union in America, an offshoot of the Polish National Alliance that was founded in St. Paul. It contained a small amount of local reportage from outstate Minnesota in addition to its Twin Cities coverage. Then, while doing some personal genealogical research in early-1900s issues of *Rolnik*, from Stevens Point, Wisconsin, I noted frequent and lively correspondence from several Minnesota towns, including Little Falls and Duluth. Finally, using the indexes to the publications of the Polish National Catholic Church, I found items from *Straż* on the foundation of that denomination's parish in Duluth, St. Josephat's. I took copies of as much of this material as I could, on a random basis from *Rolnik* and *Straż* and on a more thorough basis from *Stońce*, and started plugging away on the translation.³

As I got more deeply into the material, I found a few potential flashpoints for a 21st-century republication. In a couple of items, I found examples of the block-headed anti-Semitism that too many of our Polish forebears espoused. All of it seemed to be by way of casual references, not essential to the subjects or meaning of the pieces. I also encountered many more ethnically-based jibes, directed toward a variety of groups: the German people in general, the Irish-descended hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church in America, and even another nationality or two. Finally, some correspondents took very specific shots at the character or actions of other Polish-Americans in their communities.

This presented a clash of two values. On the one hand, it's always been my motto that "real genealogists don't blink," and neither should serious historians. We should all strive to accurately recreate the past, and the best such reconstruction is one with all the warts and wrinkles. Just as strongly, however, I get disturbed whenever I see modern-day Polish-Americans and Jewish Americans perpetuate a nasty undertone of distrust and recrimination when they talk about the heritage and past actions of the ancestors of the other group. This is especially annoying when it expands to

suspicion of the motivations of present-day historians and genealogists, in the way they conduct their research and present their findings. It seriously undercuts one of the PGS-MN's central messages when our communications include examples of such rancor, or might act to prompt it now, however unwittingly; this organization was founded on an express philosophy of inclusiveness, to cover the members of *all* ethnic groups that inhabited the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at its height.

So, I made a policy decision to split the blanket, but on a rationale that I think is defensible. Many pioneer Polish-American institutions were founded against a backdrop of ethnic rivalry in the New World, particularly in their first parish communities. Their story simply can't be told without including the carping about the Germans and the Irish. Thus, I decided to leave that in. (Here and there it's actually funny, at least if one puts on the same ethnic thick skin that we Iron Rangers grow from birth.) I also took a deep breath and decided to leave in the negative characterizations about particular individuals, as long as they did not reflect in some way on their present-day descendants. After all, this material is a century old, more or less, and under Anglo-American common law one cannot defame a dead person. The fair-minded reader will recognize that most times such personal recriminations are a matter of perspective, and the maligned subjects would have had their own take on the described events. Finally, most genealogists get great satisfaction from finding the horse thieves in the family. It's the most colorful and interesting stuff you can dig up--at least if you're removed from it by a couple of generations!

However, I decided to edit out the anti-Semitic asides, whether they were blunt or expressed in more "coded" language. Yes, it's not the most responsible historiography. However, there's simply no room in a bridge-building organization for anything as provocative as this, when it's not essential to the bigger message of the translated piece. To be editorially clear, I will indicate such deletions by the ellipsis "...". Those who are curious, or who have a valid historical interest, can dig out the original publications and can wade through the Polish themselves.

So, I made a start. I had hoped to open the series earlier this year with an installment on Duluth, just to thank Ray Marshall for his groundbreaking; I had assembled a rather partisan commentary from *Wiarus* on the foundation of Duluth's Polish Cemetery, and travelogue-type items from *Rolnik* and *Stońce*. However, the prose style of the *Wiarus* piece was so self-consciously literary and dense that I will have to seek

³I have compiled an index of the local reportage from about two-thirds of *Stońce*'s short run, and hope to finish it by the end of the year for publication here.

some expert help on its Polish and its Latin. In addition, I found a rejoinder to the author in an ensuing issue of *Wiarus*, seemingly from an opposite perspective. I decided that this really should be added to the first Duluth presentation, for the sake of balance, and am still working on it. With luck, I will be able to present all of these items in a near-future issue, as a tip of the hat to Ray.

To make a quick substitute for the inaugural column, I chose a short travelogue piece from *Stońce*, on several of central Minnesota's Polish settlements. This one was easier to translate. It covers three different localities, though a bit sparsely. It gives some idea of the way in which earlier-arriving Poles went into small business in rural areas, and features more personal names than many travelogue-type pieces; thus, it's a more substantial contribution to the genealogical endeavor.

All of this will make for a great adventure--uncovering a forgotten past, and one that nobody outside the Polish-American community is interested in pursuing. So, let us begin.

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