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DROBNE ECHA

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Dateline: Lexington

From *Wiarus*, 1901, and *Rolnik*, 1906-1908

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LeSueur County, southwest of the Twin Cities, had a small Polish-American community a century ago, numbering around sixty families. For our latest exploration into Minnesota's past in the Polish-language press, here are my translations of four reports datelined at Lexington in LeSueur County, from 1906 to 1908. I found them in *Rolnik*, published at Stevens Point, Wisconsin. I've also included an item from Lexington that was published in Winona's *Wiarus* in 1901.¹

From Wiarus, November 14, 1901:

LEXINGTON, Minn. – The Poles who have settled here have received permission from the bishop of the diocese of Winona for the construction of a church under the patronage of St. Joseph. Thus they have purchased two acres of land for the church, the size of which will amount to 60 feet in length, and 36 in width. This will be a wooden church.

The construction has already begun and the foundation stones are already laid. There are 60 Polish families settled here.

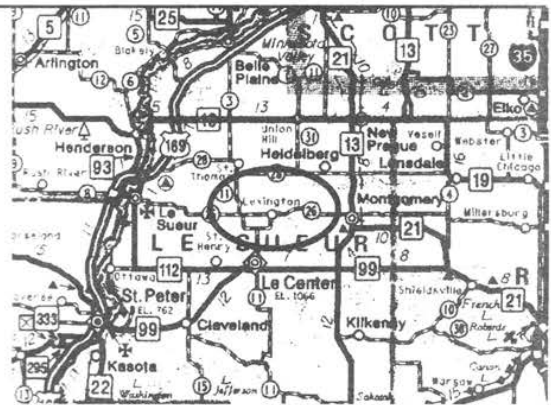
From Rolnik, January 19, 1906

From Lexington, Minn.

I ask the Honorable Editor for the placement of these several news items, or rather memories from a trip, from which we recently returned.

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¹I have followed the standard genealogical-writing practice of putting all surnames in the text into capital letters, to aid those who are skimming for "their names."



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Drobne Echa, continued from page 1

We made our way first to Little Falls, Minn., there having visited our friends, and with them we left for Pike Creek, in Morrison County. All of the area there is pretty, fertile and densely settled by Poles. We liked it there very much, because we came across our own old friends, with whom we would have had fun years since in the old country; and though all of them had been indigent coming from the old country, they had acquired much here by their work and are currently in good shape. This was a pleasant and unexpected encounter, after so many years of separation. Thus we stayed among our countrymen for three days, and next we made our way to Platte, Minn., where once again we visited our friends for four days, after which we returned to Little Falls; though after a short visit there we made our way to Swan River, and there visited Mr. August RESZKA and many other friends.

– Mr. Franciszek GINTER recently celebrated his silver wedding anniversary, commemorating 25 years of married life. This celebration was lavish and exuberant, because the guests were from more than twenty families and Mr. GINTER brought in 22 barrels of beer as well as other liquors. Mr. GINTER says that since his first wedding anniversary celebration was not as sumptuous, he thus wanted to reward himself for the second. All enjoyed themselves splendidly and good-naturedly; and since the weather was bad, and the snow fell thickly, we enjoyed ourselves in the feting of a ring of friends for two days, pleasantly and hospitably entertained by the esteemed persons commemorating their anniversary.

– Mr. Józef REKOWSKI, a well-off farmer from this area who was widowed in a recent year, intends to enter the bonds of matrimony once more and in that purpose he stayed for three weeks in Winona. It is rumored that his visit was successful, because next month he is going there again and this time a wedding will be celebrated there as well. The luck of God to the newlyweds!

JAN SCHIPRITT.

From Rolnik, February 8, 1907:

From Lexington, Minn.

On Tuesday January 29 the matrimonial union between Mr. Jan RASKA and Miss Paulina BLENK was blessed. The wedding ceremony was held in the church of St. Joseph, and the wedding banquet was at the home of the parents of the young lady. This was a

delightful party, all because the guests enjoyed themselves all the way to noon the following day. A second wedding was performed on February 5, namely that of Mr. Józef MALIŃSKI and Miss Marta ZINIER. For the first wedding Mr. R.A. RASKA came here from Little Falls and he stayed here several days, during which he paid visits to his parents, brother, sister, and brother-in-law. Mr. B. RYNGWELSKI from Little Falls also sojourned here, and he visited his relatives and friends. A third wedding will be that of Mr. Józef REKOWSKI, and it will take place in Minneapolis.

Through the middle of last month we had a soft enough winter, but from the 20th there began cold and snow, which has passed every possible expectation, because the snow has fallen almost every day and we have already had too much.

Because we had a good enough harvest last year, universal prosperity reigns as well. We got more than 70 bushels of corn per acre, 20 of wheat, 40 of oats and 40 of barley; and of potatoes 200 and more, only the prices of grain have not been favorable.

We have our own church here; but we do not have a priest yet, because a rectory has not yet been built. There are around 60 Polish families here, and a priest comes twice a month, for which we pay \$400 per year.

A SUBSCRIBER.

From Rolnik, March 8, 1907:

From Lexington, Minn

Because warmer days have thus come to our area, Mr. Stork has also left a gift to Jan BINCZIK, in the form of a beautiful little daughter. Mother and child are healthy; and both parents are rejoicing beyond measure, because up to now they have had only boys, six of them.

P. J. SCHIPRITT intends to build a residence house in the spring. He wants also to purchase a pair of horses; thus whoever would have such for sale, should notify him.

Mr. Józef REKOWSKI was a widower for two years, but on February 11 he was married to Anna NOWAK, a Czech woman from Minneapolis; but on the second day he fell ill and he is severely ailing still now.

It is so warm here, that the farmers are even saying



Church of Saint Joseph
Served by
Church Of Saint Scholastica
Heidelberg, MN 56071

that in a couple of weeks they will be sowing wheat, if it lasts that much longer.

Mr. Fr. GINTER has procured ship tickets to Prussia for his sons-in-law and has paid more than 300 dollars for them, because this is a large family made up of nine persons.

Many of our countrymen do not take any Polish newspaper; and when all is said and done it is a disgrace for a Pole not to have a Polish publication in the house. They need to order *Rolnik* for themselves right away, because this is the best and most righteous newspaper in America, carefully and honestly drafted in the Polish language.

A SUBSCRIBER.

From Rolnik, February 14, 1908:

From Lexington, Minn. – Jan PILEWSKI, a farmer, was traveling from town by wagon at the end of October last year. At that time the horses were frightened by something and bolted. PILEWSKI fell from the wagon and was hurt very badly. From that time he has been ill and has been lying in bed; only now he has returned enough to health, that he has stood up and can now walk.

On January 20 we had a parish meeting. The income of the parish in the last year came to \$2,192.35, the expenses: \$1,907.32, with \$200.85 remaining in the treasury for the current year. The parish treasurer

here is citizen Jan CIESIEWSKI, the secretary – Bernard GLISIŃSKI, and to the committee belong: Ignac RETKA and Jan SCHIPRITT.

Up to now we have had a very soft winter: without cold and without snow – altogether like a summer. But we have two months to spring yet, thus who knows, how it will be then, later.

On February 11 we had a grand ball here. The income from the ball was allocated to the church. The ball was an outstanding success. How much money was brought in from this ball I do not know; at the time when I am writing. Perhaps I can give the extent of the income in my next correspondence.

To our organist (and to his wife) the jokester stork brought two daughters at one time. The state of the health of the mother and the little twin girls is good.

Whoever among our countrymen intends to purchase land, come here; there is enough good ground here, for \$80 per acre.

JAN SCHIPRITT.

The single short item from *Wiarus* translated here is the only report from Lexington that John Radziłowski found in his study of that newspaper several years ago. The content of the four letters from *Rolnik* is somewhat slight, and they are all with a Lexington dateline that I found in that newspaper between late 1905 and mid-1909.²

²The sparsity of these five items matches the paucity of published material about the history of this little Polonian outpost. The one early-20th-century general history of LeSueur County that is available at the Minnesota History Center barely even mentions Lexington, and says nothing about a Polish presence there. William G. Gresham, ed., *History of Nicollet and LeSueur Counties Minnesota: Their People, Industries and Institutions* (Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Co., Inc., 1916), vol. 1, pp. 424-426. There are a couple of pages about Lexington and St. Joseph's Church, its Polish-ethnic parish, in a local history published for the U.S. Bicentennial. See Blanche Havel Zellmer, "Early Lexington" and "St. Joseph's Catholic Parish—Lexington," in *Montgomery: From the "Big Woods" to the "Kolacky Capital," 1856-1976* ([Montgomery, Minn.?]: Montgomery Bicentennial Committee, 1976), pp. 31-32. In 1908, Father Kruszka included a few lines about Lexington in his *Historia Polscy w Ameryce*. Waclaw Kruszka, *A History of the Poles in America to 1908, Part IV: Poles in the Central and Western States* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 120. *Editor's note: We also covered St. Joseph's and Lexington briefly in this newsletter. See Autumn 1994, p. 7.*

However, a few aspects of the content are noteworthy for us as historians and genealogists. First, we have the obvious connection between the Polish-American communities of Lexington and Little Falls/Swan River/Sobieski, in central Minnesota's Morrison County. There are several direct references to such a connection in these letters. Beyond that, there is the coincidence of a number of additional family names between the two areas—which is probably only the tip of the iceberg.³

These ties are undoubtedly what prompted the writing and publication of these reports from Lexington, as there was a very strong and years-long link between the Little Falls Polish-American community and *Rolnik*.⁴ Unfortunately, it seems, the correspondent(s) lacked the time after 1908 that he or they had had during the winters of previous years; or, perhaps, there was a falling-out of some sort. In any case, I've found no more Lexington correspondence in *Rolnik*.

The second is the little family-history nuggets that these items offer to descendants of a couple of lineages. Clearly, Franciszek GINTER was doing well financially in Lexington, what with that wedding-anniversary blowout in late 1905 or early 1906, and the rare ability to afford a trip back to the Polish lands for his family. And we see the year-long effort of widower REKOWSKI to find a new spouse, obviously unsuccessful in Lexington and then extended through the Polish stronghold of Winona and on to Minneapolis (and a "mixed marriage" with a daughter of Bohemia).

Finally, in both newspapers, we have mention of St. Joseph's, the Polish-ethnic Roman Catholic parish in Lexington. There isn't much, which matches the dearth of material about St. Joseph's in the usual secondary sources. What I was able to find, however, does establish that St. Joseph's was founded by the

³For instance, Gene RETKA of Little Falls recently told me that his grandfather moved north to Sobieski from Lexington, about a century ago.

⁴I noticed the Little Falls-*Rolnik* connection several years ago, when I started reviewing *Rolnik*'s pages for Minnesota-dated correspondence. My ongoing (but sporadic!) research has revealed that *Rolnik* published a report from Little Falls in probably 3/4 of its issues from 1906 to 1909. I have begun compiling an every-name index to this material for publication in this newsletter, though it will be a year or two before that appears.

local Poles themselves, on their strong desire to have their own place of worship in the midst of LeSueur County's sea of Czech and German immigrants. That commitment has remained firm for over a century; though it did not have a resident pastor until 1948, St. Joseph's was serviced as a mission parish for decades, by priests of Polish origin or extraction, and it retains our ethnic self-identification even as it stands today as a mission parish of St. Scholastica parish in nearby Heidelberg.⁵

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS: I was able to push my way through the translation of the *Rolnik* letters without difficulty until the very end, when I could not find the word *bilźniątek* in my comprehensive Polish-English dictionary. Anna Kuroczycka, my translation helper and former UNESCO camp student, pointed out that this was a typo—and that the correct spelling was *bliźniątek*, the genitive-case plural diminutive for "female twin." Shirley Zimprich, volunteer genealogist for the LeSueur County Historical Society, directed me to the Montgomery bicentennial history. To the two of them, *dziękuję!*

⁵Father Kruszka's short item on Lexington and St. Joseph's, *supra* n. 2, seems to be derived mostly from the 1901 *Wiarus* report. In Blanche Havel Zimmer's writeup, *supra* n. 2 at p. 31, it is stated that the Lexington-area Poles, "from the area of Warsaw," settled there "[b]etween the years 1900 and 1902." This author gives a list of the first local Polish settlers, at the end of her brief account. In his recent book, John Radziłowski noted that Polish-Americans from further east in the United States were among them. *Poles in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), p. 6. And, finally, there's the 1949 "Questionnaire on Parish History" submitted to the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis by Father John Sliwa, Lexington's only resident pastor. In it, he attributes the long-time "loyalty of people to parish despite distant residence to church" to their "desire of having own church and pastor," this having resulted in St. Joseph's being "quite stable" for the first half-century of its existence. (This questionnaire is available on microfilm M260, roll 8, at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul.)