

MORRISON AND TODD COUNTIES
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CHAPTER XIX.

THE POLISH PEOPLE.

By A. F. Koslosky.

In writing the history of our Polish citizens in Morrison county it is imperative that we know something of their native land, whence they have emigrated, and of the freedom and privileges they have enjoyed there, so as to better enable us to judge the progress and achievements they have made since they landed here in this land of freedom and opportunities.

The Polish people came from the great Slavonic race; we hear about them as early as 550 A. D.; they inhabited the country surrounding the ancient Polish cities of Posen and Gnezen (Prussian Poland), the latter city being their capital. Their first king was Mieczislav I, crowned in 962 A. D., under whose reign they became christianized. They weathered the political storms and numerous Asiatic raids. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they reached a high stage of culture and civilization, with many fine schools and churches; a fine constitutional government, as well as a literature not excelled by any other nation.

Between 1772 and 1795 their beautiful country of two hundred and eighty-two thousand square miles was divided between her three jealous neighbors—Russia, Prussia and Austria. Since then the Polish people have undergone untold sufferings. In Russian Poland they were permitted to use the Polish language, but the persecution of the religious and educational institutions was simply intolerable; any display of Polish nationalism was dealt with severely, but since 1905 conditions have changed for the better, and, strange to say, the percentage of illiterates is very small. Economically, the Prussian Pole was more fortunate than his brother in Russian and Austrian Poland, but even there did the cruel grip of oppression tighten on the unfortunate Pole. The Polish language was barred from all schools, from public meetings, even from the streets. All literature with a semblance of a Polish national character was at once confiscated, and at last came the cruel Dispossession Bill, whereby the government official can at any time

dispossess any Polish real estate owner on his making the slightest show of self-defense.

The Galician (as the Austrian Pole is called), prior to 1860, was even more oppressed than the Pole of Russian or Prussian Poland. In 1860 Galicia was granted partial autonomy. This was not freedom as we Americans understand freedom; still the Galician had a fighting chance, and he progressed with such rapidity that he even excelled his oppressors. Oppressed at home, persecuted on the street, at school, at church, in the army, ruled by three monarchs, they still were sons of one mother—Poland. They wept for each other, yet suffered alike; even their very soul was not their own. Still the hardy Pole clung tenaciously to the Polish soil, and up to 1860 the Polish emigration was very light, but since 1870 and 1872 each succeeding year doubled or trebled the number of Polish emigrants. On they came, first from Silesia, West Prussia and Great Poland. On they came from Galicia and on they came from Russian Poland, some with money and others with just enough money to bring them over the ocean. Some came on passes furnished them by relatives or friends. Some came with families, others just the head of the family, or some single members of the household, but on they came over the briny deep until now their number has almost reached the five million mark.

Each immigrant carries with him his own scars of hardship. None knew the language of Americans; none knew the customs of the country or its laws. The few who had money suffered but little inconvenience, but those who had only the price of a loaf of bread, with their family across the ocean, in poverty and misery, took the first job that Providence threw in their way and stuck to it and saved their earnings. After getting their family across to this country they at once commenced opening up homes, purchasing land on the installment plan. The Polish emigrant who settled in Morrison county was no exception; on him also are visible scars of hardship.

FIRST POLISH EMIGRANT.

The first and oldest Polish settlement in this county is North Prairie in Two Rivers township, and the first to face the Morrison county wilderness were John and Simon Schwintek, about 1868. Then John Mucha and Carl Thomalla in about 1870. John Kasperek, Sr., came about 1872. Leaving St. Cloud, they followed the Mississippi river, and rough roads and corduroy bridges were their only means of transportation. The slow, steady but sure ox-team and lumber wagon carried their earthly possessions.

At last they landed on their little claim, and the only clear space was the sky above them. They were then in the midst of oaks, elms and basswood trees hundreds of year old. Here they built their log houses and with the courage of a Cæsar or a Napoleon, they started to clear up the land. Soon others of their kind came; family, kindred and friends were soon added to the little colonies, mostly from Silesia, Prussian Poland. Soon all available land was taken up, forests and sloughs were transformed into productive fields and meadows. Log houses disappeared and neat frame residences took their places. Straw sheds went down and fine, large barns went up. Spacious granaries were built and paths and trails were changed to graded highways.

What is true of North Prairie is also true of Swan River, Flensburg, Elm Dale, Bowlus, Holdingford, Little Falls and Platte. There is some doubt as to who really was the first Polish settler in the above named settlements, but whoever they were, they arrived about the year 1876, and each settlement bears evidence of the same energy and progress. The Polish immigrant is very successful at farming, but he has also liberally contributed to the county, city and village population as well. He now has to his credit nine beautiful churches, and there is hardly an industry or business in which he is not well represented.

The Polish immigrant has prospered in Morrison county. Yes, he has prospered in spite of thousands of obstacles. God grant that he prosper in the future, ever mindful of his duties and obligations to this great American nation that has so kindly adopted him one of her sons.

If ever there was a time when the Americans had a prejudice as against the Pole, that day has long since passed, for they have proved themselves to be worthy the confidence and esteem of all other good citizens. While at times we hear people speak of their being "clannish," it is an unjust assertion, for it will be remembered that all foreigners upon coming to our shores naturally mingle with those of their own fellow countrymen, those who speak the same language and attend the same church and school. The Yankees, should any considerable number of them form a colony in any one of the foreign countries, would do the same thing, as it is but human to do so. But today this line is not so marked as in former years. Today the Pole stands for all that is good and excellent in our government, and even more highly prizes and respects the flag of his adopted country than many native-born citizens, and if need be will fight for it as bravely.